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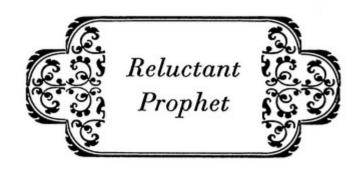
## **Reluctant Prophet**

by

Harald Tandrup

Published 1939

## RELUCTANT PROPHET



Translated from the Danish of
HARALD TANDRUP
by A. G. Chater



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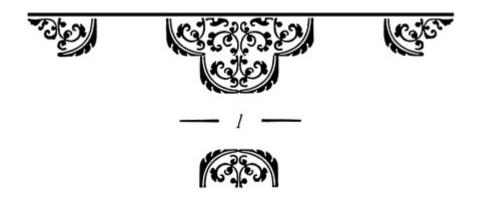
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Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

f this was a film we should start with an announcement in big letters: About the year 700 B.C. heavy stormclouds were gathering over the peaceful strip of coastline shadowed by the mountains of Lebanon. But dates don't make us any wiser, unless we belong to the chosen few who can run up and down their chronology like fingers playing scales on the piano. It's something if we can remember that the Pyramids were built between 3000 and 4000 years before Christ; what else may have happened between that and the year 1 is rather hazy to most of us.

Jonah lived at a time when Rome in all modesty might have celebrated her Silver Jubilee. The Olympic Games had been established for fifty years, and Carthage had been going for seventy. Most of what went on in Europe

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north of the Alps, at any rate—resembled the simple, restless life of an Indian camp. There were many cultured people in China, but they were so far away that as far as Western civilisation was concerned they might just as well have lived in the moon.

In *our* hemisphere there were only two countries that counted for anything: Egypt and Assyria. Originally the Assyrians were a colony of Babylon, but for some time the tail had wagged the dog. The Babylonians were such decent folks that they couldn't rule over others for long. They

were art-lovers—and that's never a good sign—but they were also food-lovers, and that's worse. They grew fat and lazy. So it came about that it was the King of Nineveh who was given the title of Lord of the World. He knew no better than to imagine the world as flat as a plate, floating in an immeasurable Ocean, with Nineveh just where you would plant a pat of butter if the plate was full of porridge. But Pharaoh also called himself Lord of the World, and many wars were waged on this account. Perhaps the empire on the Nile enjoyed the greater repute, though it was inferior in fighting power. Even at that time it was impregnated with the iridescent corruption which lends a false vitality to doomed civilisations in the last millennium before their collapse.

And then of course there was Greece, where thinkers already sat with their finger to their nose, absorbed in those speculations on the nature of existence which in the course of some thousands of years were to lead to the modern European spirit.

But then as now the Mediterranean rocked like an everlasting deep-blue cradle. It washed the coast of Asia Minor and daily splashed the walls of towns that had

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ventured to encroach upon its borders. Seen from a boat out at sea these towns were like fairy palaces of sugar-icing—they look like that to-day—but if you came nearer they were clusters of dirty houses plastered against the cliffs like yellow swallows' nests.

A little community of this sort was the town of Gath, which was situated in a corner of the map where Asia and Africa join, and where already at that time a far-seeing Pharaoh had begun to dig a canal to the Red Sea. We know Gath from our schooldays as the place from which Goliath came up against Israel, but in Jonah's time Goliath had long ago been slain by little David and nobody remembered his name. The town was occupied in doing business; Gath was a Philistine town, and our high-brows are mistaken in trying to make out that a Philistine is a narrow-minded person. On the contrary, they knew how to make money, and people who can do that are seldom narrow in their views.

It was a bustling little town, where a couple of thousand people made so much noise that one would have thought there were ten times as many of them. They were cramped for space and there was good cause for shouting and swearing when men and beasts trod on each other's toes.

The blue sea, the blue sky, the yellow houses, the dull green gnarled olive-trees and the palms—looking like feather-brushes planted in red earth—formed a suitable setting for men in cloaks of the colour of old coffee-sacks. And there were khaki-coloured camels, so filthy that clouds of dry dirt rose from their humps when their drivers gave them a whack of the stick.

The few upper-class people in Gath looked down on all this when they stepped out on their flat roofs in cloaks

of purple silk. Now the grey vultures who spent most of their time on the edge of the wall came to life, expecting to see a bucketful of offal flung out from a kitchen. Then they flapped off with their scraggy necks outstretched, and with an expression like that of offended old maids.

Down in the courtyards men sat in the shade of the arcades keeping an eye on the slaves, who were made to feel the stick if they didn't move fast enough. There was an American tempo in the life of Gath. Money had to be roped in while there was any to be made; one never knew when Egypt and Assyria might go to war again, and then Gath had the prospect of being looted by both sides.

In one of these trading yards, which smelt of wine, dried fish and cedar-wood, a dignified man sat on a leather cushion. Now and again he changed his position, when he felt the cushion getting red-hot under him. He had a thin beard and thick, negro-like lips, just as a Philistine ought to look. By his side—but on the bare stone, to show the difference in rank—sat his scribe, drawing strokes on a clay tablet every time a slave passed with a bale of wool.

The scribe was a Jew.

The merchant believed in the god Dagon, the scribe in a god he called the Lord. Religious differences were not taken so seriously in Gath as in Jerusalem, where people could not meet without quarrelling about which god was the right one.

The scribe's name was Amittai and he was one of the nervous, idealistic Jews on whom money makes no impression. He was elder of the congregation in Gath and something approaching a holy man, whom his coreligionists looked up to with admiration, but at the same

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time with a shake of the head. Those Jews who came to Gath usually came there in order to make money and not to wear themselves out in the service of the Philistines. But Amittai was too pious to be any good at business.

For a moment, when there was a gap in the ceaseless chain of wool-carriers, the merchant had a friendly impulse and asked in a thick voice—these Philistines were apt to be wheezy—how his scribe's son, Jonah, was getting on. Had he heard from him lately?

Thank you, yes! His son had sent a letter from Tyre. He was there now.

"Is he doing business?" asked the merchant condescendingly. But there was also a touch of mockery in his tone; he knew very well that not much was to be expected of Amittai's son. He had seen the fellow grow up and had always put him down as a good-for-nothing.

The scribe's face twitched nervously. Nobody knew better what the people of Gath thought about his son, that strange creature who was neither fish nor fowl and who changed his mind seven times as he crossed a threshold. But naturally his father was bound to defend him.

"I think one may call it business," he said. "My son sells cakes in the street."

"Cakes?" said the merchant, with a sound like a seal coming up to blow. "Cakes? That's nothing much!" And he was right. A person who went about the streets of Tyre calling cakes corresponded to what one would call nowadays a banana man.

The scribe said: "To earn one's daily bread in frugality and the fear of God is already a great thing for a person who has to make his own living!"

"But your son has had a good education," said the

merchant. "Why doesn't he try a more respectable employment?"

This was by no means easy to explain. But the scribe said, with a pride which was legitimate in speaking to a man of money who could neither read nor write: "My son writes Egyptian on papyrus and Assyrian on clay tablets. He reads the holy scriptures fluently. He is a learned man."

"Then why isn't he a scribe like yourself?"

At this the humble scribe showed something of the innate insolence that lurks in the oppressed Jew, and he said with well-considered venom: "My son has the evil desire of growing rich, and wealth is not easily acquired by those who at the same time wish to be honest. It is written—"

The rich man said sternly:

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"What do I care what is written? Attend to your work!"

Was he to put up with sneers from an inferior? What next!

Again the men passed in single file across the sun-baked yard. They came from a little ship no bigger than a smack, but so broad in the beam that she could hold an incredible quantity of cargo. They were now carrying goats' skins filled with perfumed resin from Arabia, and their sweating naked bodies were enveloped in its overpowering scent.

Presently the merchant said: "Is your son really stupid enough to think he can get rich by selling cakes to the sailors of Tyre?"

"He hopes so," said the scribe meekly.

"How old is he?"

"Two-and-thirty."

"Ha!" said the merchant scornfully. "You know the

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old proverb, that if a man isn't rich at thirty he'll be as poor as a camellouse all his days."

"If the Lord wishes to make him great, all is possible!" said the scribe piously.

The conversation came to a standstill. The slaves hurried across the streak of sunshine and slackened their pace when they reached the cool shade of the warehouse. The merchant cried to his overseer to make them move faster, and the stick could be heard drumming on their bare backs. The rich man reached out for a pitcher of wine and water that stood by his side and took a swig. The poor scribe was thirsty too, but he had to be content with sucking a pebble. And he thought: Would that the Lord might smite this heathen dog with boils as big as fists. Blessed be my poor son's honest labour!

II

IN TYRE they were celebrating the feast of the god Dagon. It was a queer topsy-turvy day, as the women were allowed to propose, but if they proposed to the wrong man there was a row. In love affairs the men were as fiery as Malayan fighting-cocks. Kissing was common on Dagon's Day, but so was stabbing.

Dagon had the shape of a merman, with a fish's tail; and he was the symbol of fertility, since he came from the sea which swarmed with life. To

the people of Tyre fertility and love were one and the same. These men and women, who on occasion marched in procession with idols and symbols from which a modern woman would turn away in disgust, were in reality as decent as could be. When the women proposed on Dagon's Day they did so by offering the man they loved a cake in the shape of a

fish. If he ate it, that meant he was willing. If he said no, thanks, that caused a little heartache, but as the main object was not to get a man but to get children, the woman soon found another. At Tyre men were in the majority.

In old days—that is, what the Tyrians called old days—the women made the cakes themselves, but as people grew more exigent—sugar-icing in various colours was now the vogue—it was simpler to buy the cakes readymade. There were bakers who made a living out of them. And there was to be found the Jew Jonah with his basket on his head and his longdrawn cry: "Ca-akes! Ca-akes!"

It was a great day for a cake-seller. All the women wanted cakes, and the cakes had to bear some scribbling in sugar which was supposed to be an Egyptian magic formula. In Tyre they were not very particular about the nationality of their gods; for Tyre was a cosmopolitan city, a meeting-place of many peoples and beliefs. But it is a fact that the more easy-going men are in matters of faith, the more scope there is for superstition, and this accounted for the huge demand for Egyptian magic cakes. It was thought they would bring fertility, and the women of Tyre could never have children enough, though the little ones died like flies on their hands.

Jonah had chosen this city because it was the place men went to if they wanted to make their fortunes. In the Jewish mountain villages they talked of men who had gone to the coast as if they were prospecting for gold. They might be expected back any day with a camel and a couple of wives to work for them.

Jonah's secret aim was to become a rich man like the merchant who bullied his inoffensive father. When he had made enough money he intended to go to Gath and marry one of the fattest of its girls—naturally one who had

some money to her name, so that he could set up in business as a moneylender and in course of time have many children, a long beard and a fat stomach, which was the greatest dignity a man of his class could imagine. He would be one who could presume to trample on others, especially on those who had called him a fool for not choosing to sit at the feet of a fat and stupid Philistine, writing with a style and getting the stick when he didn't write fast enough.

Jonah was an insignificant little man; he was well aware of that. His features were obliterated, as though the Creator had wiped them out while the clay was still wet. People look something like that when they have a heavy cold; you can't quite see what is nose and what is mouth. But there was one handsome thing about Jonah and that was his great innocent eyes, like those of a deer. It could be seen that he came of a desert people, taking after the deer that fly over the sand with round, wondering, moist eyes. Jonah's eyes sometimes had a gleam of heartfelt sadness—or something that looked like it—which thrilled the girls with sympathy. And that was dangerous—the door of the heart was ready to burst ajar. But this was wasted on Jonah, whose heart was hard. He was not looking for poetry, but for money. Therefore he would not marry unless he saw a profit in it. Romance was not in his line; licentiousness still less.

Besides, he had his secret pride to give him moral stiffening. He was a learned man. Who would have believed that this person who went about shouting "Ca-akes! Ca-akes!" could read and write—that he had mastered the mysterious art which qualified a man for the best-paid situations? All those who had to toil and moil in the sun envied the lucky ones who could sit in the shade scratching

signs on a tablet. If a lower-class mother had dared to be so bold, she would have prayed to the gods to make her child a scribe. But Jonah knew that learning and affluence do not go together. No, *business*—that was the way! And if one can't afford to buy cargoes one must start with a basket of cakes

or a bundle of sandal laces.

In his mud floor at home, under the reed mat on which he slept, he had a jar of silver pieces hidden away. It was no fortune, but if he kept on at the same rate for a couple of years he would be able to buy a donkey and load it with goods. He hoped to be one of the hucksters who travelled round the mountain villages buying up the women's woven fabrics for a few glass

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beads and Phoenician trinkets. The cloth was then sold in the coast towns, where there was a great demand for Jewish homespun—but of this the foolish women had no idea.

He prudently added coin to coin, and at night, when he could not sleep, he counted them on his fingers like the woman with her eggs. He was frugal and respectable. He wandered tirelessly from house to house with his cries, so long-drawn that they made a melody: "Ca-akes! Ca-akes! To-day is Dagon's Day! Come all you fair maids, buy a cake for your lover! And you matrons, ornaments of Tyre, come and buy Dagon ca-akes—buy the Fish-god's ca-akes—blessed by the reverend priests of Astarte's temple!" (This by the way was a lying advertisement.) "Buy my love-ca-akes!"

Naturally the fish-god was an abomination to an orthodox Jew. He knew his pious father would be terribly pained if he suspected that his son was selling cakes dedicated to an idol. But one must live, thought Jonah. He also carried—hidden under a linen cloth—some cakes that were unblushingly fashioned as symbols of fertility. These

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he sold later in the day in taverns, where such things were treated as a joke. His old father would have liked this less, but then it was the scribe's chief misfortune that he had no business sense.

Like the baker in the Bible—the Egyptian baker in Joseph's dream—Jonah carried his basket on his head and kept a look-out for the shadows which now and again flitted over the sunny streets—the gulls that hovered over Tyre and befouled the houses, leaving long white streaks down their yellow walls of clay. He had to see that they didn't spoil his cakes. It was bad enough to see their white icing turn grey in the course of hours from the many fingers that had meddled with them. For a woman can't choose a cake out of a basket without pawing them all over first.

Ш

THE RICH city of Tyre stood on a couple of islands close to the shore, but cake-sellers and other pedlars lived on the mainland in a little suburb called Old Tyre. The two islands could not contain the whole population that lived on the city, even though in the poorer quarters they had resorted to lofty buildings.

Jonah did not know what a skyscraper was, but when he threw his head back to look up to the top storeys he had the same feeling as a visitor to the business quarter of New York. The poorer houses of Tyre were plastered up with timber and mud in complete disregard of the laws of nature. One storey had been added on top of another, so that the lower part of the wall bent outward like the legs of a bandy-legged child. Some of these barracks were eight

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storeys high, and as staircases were unknown and the inhabitants were content with outside ladders, it looked as if they had forgotten to take down the scaffolding when the houses were finished. Upon these ladders the inmates crawled right up to the blue heaven, and sometimes right into it. More than once it had happened that a citizen, returning late from the alehouse, had missed his footing and been found next morning at the foot of the ladder with a broken neck. But even in the daytime it was a strange sight to watch women with children in their arms or rheumatic old men climbing up the ladders. Fortunately they were a race of seamen with an admixture of primitive creatures from Africa—the sort that can hang on with their toes as well as with their fingers, since it is not so long ago that their ancestors came down from the trees.

"Ca-akes!" cried Jonah. "Good, cheap ca-akes! Selling out!"

The women came tearing down the ladders to bargain, but they were difficult customers; they couldn't decide without much swearing and abusive language, and they left their finger-prints on all the cakes.

At last he had sold out, and then it was a rush to catch the last ferry to the mainland. It was filled with poultry-sellers, cake-hawkers and drunken people who had been having a high time in Tyre. Jonah sat by himself in the bow, looking down into the water. He was a stranger among these people and took no part in their merriment—a thing they greatly resented.

But when after a ten minutes' row the ferry reached the shore, Jonah was greeted by the comforting smell of rotten fish which was peculiar to Old Tyre. It came from the great factories of purple dye, which was made from a disgusting yellow slime found in the glands of sea-snails and

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mussels. This was pressed out into large vats, stood in the sun to ferment, and it stank ten times worse than dried fish or greased ammunition boots. In

this jelly they dyed the cloth and hung it up to dry, so that the smell left the stuff and drifted over Old Tyre, as the smell of cheese hangs about a shop.

Over in Tyre itself they used to say of any offal or carrion that it smelt like a dyer. But they didn't say that in Old Tyre. There it was considered honourable to smell of rotten fish, as purple was the national product which meant daily bread.

The King of Tyre was Elulaus the Ninth—popularly known as Luli—and he visited the dye-works once a year and looked into the vats with the face of a man who had just taken castor oil; after which he expressed his satisfaction with the work, and year after year made the same joke—which a later Roman emperor stole from him—that money doesn't smell. He derived a considerable revenue from the dye tax.

But that was all he got out of Old Tyre, as the people were poor. Many of the houses were of wattle and daub. Some were shaped like beehives, where one crawled in through a hole in the side, and it was incomprehensible how a numerous family could find shelter in one of these sentry-boxes. Jonah was one of the better-off; he had rented a room in a real house, which had a door that would shut and a flat roof where he could go up in the evening and sit gazing at the stars. It was the dream of every poor man to have a roof like this, so that he need not sit on the bare ground when he prayed to the moon.

Jonah lodged with a widow named Ayuta. She was only twenty and had been married at the age of twelve. She now earned her living in one of the dye-works and among

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humble folk was reckoned to be well off. She owned a jet-black pig and a dove-cot with doves.

Jonah had to go through her room to get to his own, and when he came home she was engaged in cooking a pottage of lentils. There was a pleasant, homelike scent of warm food. She asked what sort of a day he had had, and he answered: "Pretty good, thanks! If one can't sell cakes on Dagon's Day, when can one?"

And he was right. All the same he had one or two cakes left. She looked at them and bought the cheapest, and he thought to himself: Can she really be in love? Well, why not! She's human like all the rest.

Then Jonah went into his own room and lighted a dim oil lamp. The feeble flame of the rush wick shone upon a bare room which held nothing

but the mat he slept on, a box in which he kept his good cloak and a sheepskin which he spread over himself when the nights grew chilly. There was no door between his room and hers, only a grey rag, the remnant of a camel-cloth. He drew it carefully over the opening. The day's takings were now to be counted, and he did not wish to be disturbed. That done, he ate the rest of his cakes and took a draught of water. Then he set a ladder to the trapdoor in the ceiling and went out on the flat roof to enjoy the coolness which usually came with the sunset.

He looked across to Tyre, which in the dusk was like a fortress on a cliff. All its houses were merged in a single mass, of which the skyscrapers of the poor formed the lofty pinnacles. Lights gleamed over there: they were still keeping up the feast of the fish-god. But there was also life here and there in the darkness of Old Tyre. Neighbours had come out on their flat roofs and sat chatting. It sounded like a simmering buzz some notes lower than that

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of the cicadas. But there were also real musicians among them. Far away someone was playing a flute, in such melancholy tones that it sounded like a dirge for the dead. Another was twanging a stringed instrument.

And soon the vault of heaven above his head was strewed with stars; the moon came up, shedding its green, electric beams. A man with a deep bass voice intoned a prayer to the moon goddess, the gentle, the cool, the calmly beautiful moon, which only desires men's welfare, unlike the sun, which certainly brings growth, but also scorches the land and its dwellers unmercifully. The man had put this into verse, and his recital had the soft guttural sound of a beast of prey growling its amorous complaint.

Ayuta came up through another trapdoor in the roof and seated herself at a respectful distance, as befitted a woman, especially if she worked in the purple factory and smelt of sea-snails. He talked to her about the great day over in Tyre. They had carried a huge fish about the streets. It was made of painted papyrus, the body was red, the head blue, and the eyes were yellow and made to turn in the head. It took twenty men to carry it.

He had moved closer to her and they spoke in low, confidential tones. Suddenly she felt under her kirtle and produced something she had hidden in her bosom: "This is for you!" she said.

"For me?" he said in surprise. He felt the gift and found it was the cake he had just sold her. "Is it really for me, this cake?"

She turned her head away and said modestly: "Yes, if you care to have it."

So she loved him, and she meant it seriously, for she was not a light-minded woman. She wanted to be married. And being a practical woman she hastened to add:

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"I haven't spent any of what my husband left me. I've saved enough for us to buy a wine-shop. Or we could buy two camels, if you think that's better."

Jonah was silent and thoughtful. A wine-shop was a thing that brought money, but it didn't suit him very well, as he never drank himself. Two camels might be better. But all the same, this was not the future Jonah had had in mind. The fat girl at Gath played a certain part in his dreams; not just because her being fat was of such importance, as far as Jonah was concerned—but it gave one distinction to have a fat wife, like having fat horses and a fat dog. It showed there was abundance of food in the house. And then it was rather embarrassing to come home with a foreign woman. His father wouldn't like it. Especially one who had worked in the purple factories. They had a saying in Gath: The man who marries a dye-works girl must beware of holding his nose!

Ayuta turned towards him. The moon shone on her face, and he saw that her nose was pretty flat. That was not considered a mark of beauty. But she had nice eyes, the same kind of big moist eyes as Jonah himself. And she was young. For five, perhaps ten years yet she would be what the poets call a desirable woman, and by that time he might hope to afford a concubine.

He made a gesture as though he would put his arm round her and draw her to him. She stretched out both hands—whether to ward him off or to surrender them to him—and he saw something that horrified him. Her hands were purple, as if they had been dipped in cherry-juice. The stain reached right up her forearm, so that one would think she wore long red gloves. And Jonah—who had no idea that one day red nails would be the fashion—was terrified at these hands, which made him think of a high priest

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who had just plunged them into the entrails of a victim.

She noticed this and said in excuse: "We all get like that in the dyeworks, but when we take up other work the red goes off in the course of a

few months."

They sat in silence, and she dropped her eyes in humility. Would he eat the cake? Perhaps he was waiting because it wasn't so easy to get it down. She knew that every evening he ate the cakes that were left over, and he certainly didn't do that because he liked them, but because he didn't want to waste anything. Nor did she harbour any excessive hope that he might love her. She relied more on the good offer she was able to make. One doesn't lightly refuse a woman who brings one two camels.

He said cautiously: "I must think it over, Ayuta. I must ask my God if he will allow me to take you in marriage. For you are not a woman of my own people, and *my* God is strict about racial purity. He doesn't like us to mix with foreigners."

"What is the name of your God?" she asked.

"I call him the Lord," said Jonah.

"Well, but that's what my God's called too!" she said joyfully. "We call him the Lord."

Naturally it would have been easy for a learned man like Jonah to explain that Baal, her God, and Adonai, his God, were merely titles and not the names of the divinities. Both words simply meant Lord. But she would scarcely have understood that, so he said: "Every people has its own King and its own God, and they don't like each other. The Kings wage war and the celestial Lords fight after their own fashion. They are jealous gods!"

"That's only natural," said she. To her it was quite a matter of course that there was one god in Tyre and another in Sidon and a third in Gath.

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"I will speak to my God," said Jonah; "and if he says I may marry, I'll do so."

"Do speak to him," she said earnestly. And she added: "How can one make sacrifice to your God? I will present him with a sheep, then he'll be kindly disposed, even though I am a stranger. For when we're married he will be *my* God too."

"No, leave out the sheep!" exclaimed Jonah. "My God's not like that! He doesn't take bribes."

She thought he must be a strange god, and it was stranger still that his priests didn't care for mutton; but she would wait patiently till Jonah had spoken to his God. When he went down into his chamber she stayed on the roof looking at the moon, where dwells the goddess of connubial love, and

she thought: If this man could take a fancy to me I would make him a good wife. It is the will of Baal that men should marry and have children. Good Goddess! Soften his heart, light the fire of love within him, so that he may care for me—not only for the sake of the two camels, though I can well understand they are most important.

She went down into her chamber and lay on her sack of seaweed. Behind the curtain which divided the two rooms she heard Jonah mumbling. He was praying to his austere and remarkable god.

IV

IT WAS curious that fate should have led Jonah to the very town which the orthodox in his homeland bewailed before all others. How often had he seen long-bearded elders raise their trembling hands to heaven, crying in

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negro-like ecstasy: "Woe to Tyre! Woe to the great Harlot by the sea! Woe to the red men who sail over the waves and grow rich on plunder and the sweat of the poor!" (They called them red because their faces were tanned by sun and wine.) "Woe to the women who paint themselves with vermilion and blacken their eyebrows! Woe to them that worship the harlot-goddess and the fish-god!"

Whence came this rabid resentment against people who were of the same blood? The men of Tyre, Jerusalem and the other cities spoke different dialects, but outwardly it was hard to distinguish between them, and their lives were played out on a stage of very modest dimensions. A chapter of the world's history was being enacted on a coast-line of no more than a hundred and fifty miles, with a depth that a car could have traversed in an hour or two if there had been a motor road. Here were all the names that were drummed into us at school: the Kingdom of Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, Samaria, Phœnicia, the land of the Philistines—Gath, Askelon, Joppa, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon. It was all on a small scale.

Apart from the intruding Philistines all these people were Semites of various shades—Jews at sea—the English of the period in Tyre and Sidon—and Jews on land—merchants in the sea-ports, agriculturists and herdsmen among the mountains. They were all hook-nosed, thick-lipped and black-haired, except when they were mixed with Aryan blood from

foreign immigrants who had been ordered to repopulate the country when Assyrians and Babylonians had deported Jewish tribes.

These peoples had this in common: they were as fanatical as the Scots and as hot-tempered as the Italians. They were liable to flare up at any moment and get so

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hysterical that their voices cracked in the high notes and it looked as if their Adam's apples would fly out of their throats. Their hands waved as they gesticulated under each other's noses. They called on the gods to punish them if they were not honest, and at the same time cheated in a strangely righteous manner. They loved bargains, contracts and laws that were binding, but they loved even more to draw them up in such a way as to leave a loop-hole. Thus their business was never transacted quietly. A market day in Jerusalem or Askelon was like a stock exchange panic.

The Jews proper were disliked by their neighbours on account of the megalomania which made them claim to be the chosen people. But in a way they have proved to be right. Where are now the millions of Assyria, the shrewdness of Babylon, the wisdom of Egypt? The men from Jerusalem still gesticulate, keep the Law and make money all the same.

Even at that time there was a migratory spirit in them. They arrived poor as rats in the neighbouring countries and took to the most humble occupations. They began by selling sandal laces woven of horsehair. The Jewish wife sat at home making the laces, her husband went from house to house selling them. He stood patiently at the door of the alehouse and put up with many silly jokes if he could do a little business. But one fine day he came no more. He had gone into the wholesale trade and sold the laces to Phoenicians or Philistines who now had to peddle them. Another year or two went by, and the Jewess left her weaving, which was done by a Phœnician slave girl, while the chief was carried round in a litter and did business with newly arrived Jews of small account. All because these men had so little geniality that they were

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never tempted to squander their money. They had so many fads. They wouldn't eat pork, they were apprehensive of foreign women, and they didn't visit the wine-shop. Their god was a strict disciplinarian who left them no other pleasure than hoarding money. Was it strange that they made

themselves hated? At regular intervals the inhabitants of a town would fall upon the Jewish quarter and massacre these strangers as pitilessly as one smokes out vermin. But they always came back.

A mysterious trait about them was that, quite unlike their neighbours, they were on bowing terms with the Almighty. There was something curiously spiritual about their god, and apparently he must have been the right one, since he has outlived the pantheons of Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome—well, one might say he has absorbed them all into himself. In other countries, when there was anything on one's conscience, one went to a priest and got him to arrange the affair with the god who sat in the judgment-seat. The Jew went into his secret chamber and addressed himself with incredible assurance direct to the Lord of the Universe. And that was what Jonah did, as he lay on his reed mat, with his crock of savings underneath him. But above him he saw through the trap-door a section of the sparkling nocturnal sky, where he imagined the Lord to dwell.

The extraordinary thing about Jonah was his twofold nature. Perhaps he ought to have been a twin; then without a doubt one brother would have been a usurer and the other a priest. He had the souls of both in him. He was a miserable creature of the dust, and yet there was in him a mighty attraction towards things eternal. But in the daytime he succeeded in keeping the priestly soul in subjection. Its hour did not arrive till night, when all

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was still and the incomprehensibility of existence stole in upon him.

Experience had taught him how dangerous it is to live. You come to a street corner and hesitate for a moment: if you take one turning something will happen to change the whole course of your life from what it might have been if you had taken the other. Life is determined by trifles.

Here, now, was a woman who came with a tempting offer. She would give herself with her eyes of a gazelle, her cherry-red hands and two camels. What does one do in such a case? She is not one of those who cause an explosion of the senses, like dropping a spark into a box of fireworks, but she is an amiable female animal who would not be too exacting.

Now it is simply a question whether Jonah can marry a woman who is not a Jewess, but was born in Syria, a day's journey north of the border. Are not the Syrians human beings, created by the Lord? No, that's the misfortune. Only the Jews are entirely God's creatures. As to the others one must suppose they came into being like the fleas that are bred in a heap of refuse when a dog cocks up his leg against it. That was what Jonah had been taught. It is the Lord's will that the Jewish people shall march in the van of progress, and that can only be done if the race is kept pure.

Jonah had often heard his old father enlarge on this theme, never suspecting that a time would come when the strict demand for racial purity would be taken up by the blue-eyed Aryans.

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V

HIS OLD father was a remarkable man; he could not only look back into the past, he could also see into the future. Within the chosen people there had always been chosen families, and the scribe's was one of them. Many of its members had come to grief through having said things that should only have been said a few millenniums later. Now and again they had been taken outside the walls of the town and stoned by angry fellow-citizens of the kind that do not like to have their spiritual slumbers disturbed. For they are the most bloodthirsty.

This family went in for dreams, visions, forebodings and presentiments. Jonah's father had seen things that other men cannot see. He dreamt one night that he stood on a high place looking towards the sea. He saw a number of gigantic birds flying inland. They glided on out-stretched wings like the storks. When they came over Gath one bird laid a big black egg. It fell into the town, but when it reached the ground it blossomed out into a vast rose of fire, and there was a sound as of thunder. From among the mountains he saw beams of fire raised against the birds, and they answered by dropping more eggs. And at the spots where the eggs fell huge clouds arose, as though the mountain had burst asunder.

"What is the meaning of it?" asked the leader of the congregation. The scribe pondered, seeking the right interpretation and forcing the image of what was to happen in a far-off future into the bounds of his own limited understanding. It must be something to do with Egypt, which sent avenging angels over the country, he thought; but the prophets of the Lord cursed them, and the earth opened and flung out beams of lightning.

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"Yes, indeed," said the old man; "that is wisdom!" And the scribe himself thought it an excellent explanation.

Jonah had not inherited the gift of vision, but he possessed that of hearing a Voice. A clever scribe of our own day would call it his conscience or his subconscious self or an echo of his own thoughts. Jonah said that to *him* the Voice was just as real as when he heard one of the girls of Tyre call out: "Are the cakes good to-day, Jonah?"

Then could others hear this Voice? No, that was the difficulty. Of course it might be argued from this that it was unreal. But the radio dealer's stock to-day contains hundreds of instruments filled with broadcasts from all the stations of the world. Speech, song and music lie bound within them, waiting to be liberated the moment one touches the switch, but only those who know how to work the apparatus can hear. And the same was the case with Jonah and his Voice. It was a private matter.

When he was at home, surrounded by people to whom one could speak of such things without being laughed at, he used to explain the Voice in this way: "It's like a reed-pipe that speaks human language. A serious, almost melancholy Voice. I hear it as when any one of you speaks to me. And it says: 'I am *the Lord*!"

There were some who shrank from him as though he had spoken blasphemy. It surely could not be true that the Lord had chosen this insignificant Jew boy to be his mouthpiece, when there was a good supply of reverend ancients with long beards. But in any case it was a great good fortune to be appointed spokesman of the Lord. One ought to retire at once to a cave in the mountains, live on wild roots and honey and shun the society of men. That is what the real prophets did.

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But Jonah would have none of it. He said to the venerable elders: "You speak of the prophet's calling as something marvellously exalted. But how do you yourselves treat the prophets? If they tell you the truth you drive them out of town with cudgels. You hang on the lips of false prophets, who flatter you and foretell what you wish to hear. I admit that you slay the false prophets when what they have foretold does not come to pass. But what do you do then? Do you turn to the real prophets? No, indeed you don't! You run after new false prophets."

In this way Jonah had fallen out with the whole congregation at home. His mother was the only one who took his part; she said: "I am not a monster! I would rather my child became a respectable moneylender, able to bring up his family honourably, than that he should roam about like an outlaw with all the great ones of the earth against him. Jonah is to live well and die full of days, as befits a plain man. God keep him from telling men the truth! And we have false prophets enough!"

Jonah found comfort in the words of his mother. He had not the slightest desire to be a martyr, still less to lead the despised life of a poor man. He had seen enough of that in his own home. He could never be one of the happy poor who do not reflect how strange it is that some should own nothing and others everything. Nor could he become one of the meditative poor, like his father, who consoled himself with the thought that it was the Lord's will that he should never get on. According to Jonah's ideas the meaning of life must be that every man should strive after the greatest possible development of his powers. One must be capable, he said. Put plainly: one must know how to make money.

Jonah had had serious conversations with the Voice

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on this subject. For it was quite possible to talk to it. But it was stubborn. It said: "It is useless for you to fly from your fate. You are not to be rich. From the dawn of the ages you are appointed to be my witness."

To this Jonah replied: "I am quite ready to serve you within reason. I will try to be a good example to my fellow-men. I do not wish to defraud anyone; all I ask is the profit of my calling. Is that too much?"

The Voice answered with an earnestness which gave it a deep velvety note: "My son Jonah! Do you not understand that I *need* you? I, the almighty Lord of Heaven and Earth, need you, you obstinate little donkey! Naturally you cannot comprehend this, but so it is. My great Work cannot dispense with you. You are a tiny wheel, but you fit into a very important place. Now be a good son and do your duty."

"No," said Jonah stubbornly. "I don't want to be stoned, I don't want to go about in rags. I want to live like a respectable member of society. I too have a work to look after, and I am not almighty. I have a lot to do and no time to waste!"

To this the Voice made no reply, whether from sorrow, or because the good God was offended and went into his Heaven banging the door after him. It was annoying that he who held the stars in his hand should have to go begging to a dirty little Jew.

Be offended if you like, thought Jonah. I know what I want.

Many of their conversations had ended in this way. But all the same there were times—such as to-night—when Jonah turned to the Lord in his uncertainty and asked for a piece of advice. Would it do for him to marry the Syrian woman? And if he did, which would

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be the more sensible: to buy a wine-shop or to choose the two camels? He would like to hear the Lord's opinion on this point too, though with the reservation that he would act as he thought best; for he had discovered that when it came to questions of business the Lord often held ludicrous views.

This particular night was unusually restless, as Dagon's Day had stirred people's nerves. It was not till towards morning that Old Tyre calmed down. The last twanging of stringed instruments died away, the notes fading in a dull *pling-plang*, so that one could actually hear how the harp fell out of the tired hands and the player nodded off to sleep. Drunkards who had sat in the ale-house squabbling over the clay pots stole home on unsteady feet and their moist hands smacked the mud walls as they felt their way.

In the harlots' quarter the women followed their customers to the door. The humbler girls shuffled wearily to their beds of seaweed and fell into a heavy sleep like overladen beasts of burden. The superior sort first rinsed their mouths with myrrh water and spat on the floor.

The ferry-boats down in the harbour dragged at their moorings as the sea breathed. They rubbed against each other's sides with a longdrawn plaintive sound. Up on the flat roof the rats scuttled about and licked up the dew. Yes, the world was small!

Jonah lay with open eyes looking at the little square of sky through the trap-door. The stars grew pale; there was a faint light of dawn. He had the feeling of unrest that comes over animals when a storm is threatening. He longed for sleep, but it would not come.

He tried the old device of fancying he stood at the gate of the city counting the camels that passed through

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it, and he could see long rows of them stretching out on the Lebanon road.

Then suddenly the Voice announced itself, like somebody cutting in on the line during a telephone conversation. It always began with a set call, like a radio announcer: "I am the Lord thy God!" it said.

Jonah hardened his heart and tried to *think* the Voice away, but that was impossible. It went on: "My son Jonah! Trouble not your head with plans of marriage or with the purchase of camels. The day has come when you are to perform the great task for which I have appointed you. I *will* that you depart to Nineveh and proclaim to that great city that my wrath is kindled against its misdeeds, and that if it do not repent I will destroy it. You are to cry this in the streets, that every living soul may hear it!"

Then Jonah thought: If this is the Voice of God, then God has gone mad. But that is the worst thing that could happen to us all. Who is now to rule the world? Doesn't he know what Nineveh is? Doesn't he know that that city contains many more people than there are in Israel? Does he forget that the country is ruled by mighty gods? And should this city allow a foreigner to go about its streets pouring out abuse on the mighty ones? And even if it were allowed, does he think it would be taken for anything but the rantings of a madman?

The Voice had read his thoughts and sought to reassure him. "All will be well prepared in due time," it said. "The main thing is that the great Work demands that you do what you are ordered."

But Jonah was not impressed by the great Work and said: "Why doesn't the great Work demand something of Benjamin ben Joseph, who is the second richest man

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in Tyre and a Jew like myself? It doesn't look as if the great Work had taken much out of him! Nor does the great Work object to the moneylender Abraham having ten wives and renouncing the God of his fathers. He lives in grand style just the same. But of me, the poor cake-seller Jonah, the great Work demands that I go to Nineveh and get myself killed. What has the great Work done for me up to date? This mat and this sheepskin to cover me when I'm cold—but I've had to work for them! No," Jonah cried aloud, "I won't do it! I won't go to Nineveh!"

Ayuta heard this in the other room and said in a gentle voice: "Did you call, Jonah?"

He lay quite still, pretending he had talked in his sleep. The rest of the conversation between him and the Lord was carried on mutely.

The Voice whispered to him: "It is laid down in the great Plan that you enter upon the journey at the next full moon. And you will be compelled to

do it whether you like it or not. It will take you a month to reach Nineveh. It will seem to you incomprehensible that you are to arrive there without money for the journey, but all this is provided for. I am with you, and when you reach Nineveh I will smooth your path."

At this Jonah smiled bitterly in the darkness and said: "Yes, I dare say! You'll see that the King's bodyguard is drawn up at the city gate to receive me with shouts of joy, as if I was a victorious general. No doubt you've already ordered the white-clad maidens who are to go before me strewing roses. And I expect you've prepared slave girls and given them orders to wash my feet and put out fine clothes for me. And the King will step down from his throne and come to meet me, saying: 'Welcome,

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my dear Jonah! Now let us hear what you have to say against us. Tell us all our faults, so that we may take pains to amend them!"

The Voice made no reply. Jonah knew from previous occasions that when the discussion took a satirical turn on his side, the Voice would be silent, as though it were beneath its dignity to take it up with him on these lines.

"You don't answer!" he said. "You surely know best what you can ask of a poor earthworm. You are the Lord, and I am your slave. Your wings stretch from the sunset to the dawn, as the prophet says. When the sun goes down into the underworld you carry it warily through the great darkness, like a man carrying a lighted candle and shielding it with his hand. Your might is great! But why do you not use it to promote the Work? Have you never seen the Egyptian envoys when they pass through Jerusalem on their way to the Assyrian King? They sit in golden litters and have hundreds of warriors to protect them. They are attended by beautiful women and have a long train of waggons filled with precious gifts. May I ask, is that how I am to go to Nineveh?"

"You will go there on your feet," said the Voice. "A man among men. Your message is not the deceitful eloquence of the diplomat. You are filled with the spirit of truth and require neither golden litters nor armed men."

"Yes, I'm sure I shall attract attention, when I arrive barefoot," said Jonah. "Won't it be the same with me as with many others, when truth marched to victory over their graves? Do take one of the crazy ones who wish to be martyrs. I would rather live and enjoy life, as far as the fruits of my labour will permit. Is that asking too much?"

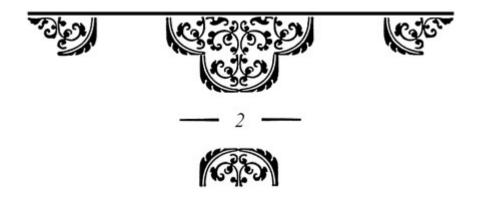
Then it seemed that the Lord was angry, and he said:

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"Worm! Your fate is decided. Submit yourself to my will. Make ready to go to Nineveh. You cannot escape doing what I command you!"

Then Jonah bowed his head.

"Woe is me," he said, "that I have so stem a Lord. I am only a little man, and I have no desire to be greater. Why does the Lord choose me of all men, when the world is full of brawlers who love noise and big words? Why does he not take one of the fanatics who lay themselves down upon the rack with a smile, as though it were stuffed with eiderdown? But God is God!"



But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

onah was up early. The sun had not yet risen above the mountains, but the reflection of the sunrise coloured the clouds of the western sky. As he raised the curtain of Ayuta's room that industrious woman had already lighted her oil lamp and was sweeping the floor with a bough.

He went up to her and said kindly: "The Lord won't have it, Ayuta!"

She stopped her sweeping. The lamp, which she held in her left hand, quivered slightly, making the little flame tremble. She had hoped for a happy life with Jonah, whom she knew to be a good creature, one that would not illtreat a woman if she placed herself in his hands. And she had some experience of what men were like.

"Did you tell your god about the camels?" she asked.

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"Yes," he said. "It wasn't any good. He insists on my going to Nineveh."

"What if I waited till you came back?"

"No!" he answered. "I shall never come back. I'm certain they will kill me in Nineveh."

"Can't we fly?" she said. "There are countries to the north where they have other gods. *There* neither your god nor mine has any power."

"I thought the same myself once," said Jonah. "But now I know that my God has a long arm. I can't fly from him. Not in that direction anyway. I

should have to go right to the world's end. And what should I do there?"

She gave it all up with a sigh. Decency forbade her to press him further. She resumed her sweeping, and he withdrew slowly, letting the curtain fall with as much circumspection as if it had been that of the Holy of Holies. Then he stood still and listened. She was still at work; the bough swept over the floor with a scraping sound, and now and again he heard her sniffling. That hurt him. She's really a nice girl with kind eyes, he thought; and she might make a good wife—to say nothing of the dowry.

Jonah went to the baker Enoch, who was a Jew like himself and supplied him with cakes. They talked of the good business done on Dagon's Day; but one had to make a living even without feast-days. What could be done to help the consumption of cakes in Tyre?

"One might make cakes like hearts," suggested Jonah. "They should have an icing of red sugar. Then if you could do something in white like a pair of billing doves, that would have a sale!"

"You have brains, Jonah," said the baker. "I've often thought it strange that people are always singing about love and talking about love and eating love in the form

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of cakes, and yet they have hearts as dry as tinder. But perhaps that's just the reason. Now I know a woman who's an exception. That's my daughter Leah. What would you say to going into partnership with me and taking Leah to wife?"

This was an entirely new proposition and a very honourable one; but Jonah knew it came too late.

"I'm going away for a time," he said. "Perhaps I shall never come back. So it's not the moment for me to think of marrying."

They were standing in the bake-house. The baker wore nothing but a loin-cloth, and the sweat ran off him from the intense heat of the clay oven. Jonah stayed by the door, where it was cooler.

"Where are you going?"

"To Nineveh," replied Jonah.

"What do you want there? In Nineveh you can't spit without hitting a cake-baker."

"The Lord sends me," said Jonah with dignity. "You know, I come of a family that serves him. I am to say to the people of Nineveh that the Lord has lost patience with them. If they do not repent he will destroy the city!"

The baker shook his head: "Poor devil! Are you sure it is really the Lord who has spoken to you? Many men see queer visions in the night-time and think they hear voices, but it is only a mockery and delusion. Have you never asked for a sign?"

"The Lord doesn't like giving signs. He insists that we shall believe in him."

"Even when he asks impossibilities?" said the baker.

"Yes, that's just where it is!" said Jonah.

The moment had come for the baker to attend to his

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oven, but before turning away from Jonah he said: "From to-day I'd rather have cash with order."

There you see what one gets out of serving the Lord! People are afraid of you. And if even the believers don't show respect, what can one look for from the heathen? As the days went by and Jonah came nearer to the new moon he felt like a condemned man waiting to be fetched for painful execution.

In desperation Ayuta had found a husband who was a textile worker. He had taken up his abode with her and they spent their honeymoon on the other side of the ragged camel-cloth. They both regarded Jonah with ill-will and never spoke to him.

At night his dread of the future increased, and he called to the Lord and begged for a sign to assure him that it was really a divine Voice that spoke within him, and not a fever in his blood that conjured forth phantasies.

"My son!" replied the Voice. "When the fullness of time is come you will be given a sign which will be talked of for thousands of years!"

"But don't you see what an anxious state I'm in?" said Jonah. "Flow shall I be able to preach to Nineveh? I confess it here, face to face with my Creator: I am no hero! It makes me shudder when I hear about tortures. My heart shrinks within me when people tell of men being plunged into boiling oil or tied hand and foot and left in an ant-hill. That's how the Ninevites treat those who rise against authority. Why am I to be exposed to such a terrible fate, when all I wish is to live unnoticed and in peace?"

"The great Work needs you," said the Voice.

"No," said Jonah. "Great Works need great men. And I am a little man."

This woke up Ayuta's weaver, as Jonah had spoken aloud in his excitement. He banged on the mud floor with a sandal and cried: "Can't one get any peace for that cursed Jew? Other people have to toil all day long, while a fellow like that has nothing to do but run about on his flat feet selling cakes. But I'm going to have my night's rest, and if I'm disturbed any more I'll crack the Jew's skull!"

Jonah lay very still and listened. The weaver was a man to be feared, broad-shouldered, with hands like a bear's paws. Jonah said no more.

II

Early next morning Jonah arrived at the ferry among the other hucksters who were bound for the wealthy city to pick up the crumbs of trade that fell from its table. They all knew one another and were cheerful and fresh. Jonah alone kept to himself and was sour. He could not mix with the people. Their hawking and spitting annoyed him, their smelling of sweat, their loud talk about all sorts of things, without saying anything new. He was undemocratic by nature, and people didn't like that in a poor man. He had to listen to many spiteful remarks.

That made him go forward, where he was alone. He looked across the water at the islands, which drew nearer when the rowers and their oars got properly going. The sea rocked the ferry-boat gently. The sun shone on the waves and was still so low that they cast purple shadows. The ferry passed boats that lay rocking with men hanging over the bulwarks and hauling up their lines as regularly as clockwork. They were fishing with bits of meat for purple snails, which they sold to the dye-works. The

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rowers shouted a good-morning to them, and they answered. The voices sounded loud and cheerful in the morning air. The ferryman himself stood in the stem steering with the after oar. He looked like a pirate, with a bushy beard and a red rag wound about his head.

Now the shadowy outline of Tyre resolved itself into a mass of houses crowded together. They glided past the dockers' quarter, where the housewives were already crawling up the ladders with pitchers of water on their heads; they reached warehouses and ships, and went right on to the great square, where the rich had their marble houses.

In one of the finest of these dwelt the Jew Asser, who had once worked in the dye factories and had had purple hands like Ayuta. He hit upon the idea of sending camel-loads of sea fish up to the market in Jerusalem. They smelt vilely before reaching the journey's end, but it became the fashion to cat sea fish, and Asser got big prices for the load he drove there in person, walking on his bare feet. Since then camels had carried fish regularly to Jerusalem, but now Asser sat in a palace and let other men lead them.

It was something of this sort Jonah had had in his mind. All his life he had dreamed one single dream in many variations—the dream of making his fortune. But now he understood that the Lord had other plans for him. Something marvellous was reserved for him. He was to be immortal, but he did not know it. And even if he had known it—would it have made him any happier?

There was melancholy in his voice as he began calling his "Ca-akes! Ca-akes!" It sounded quite sorrowful today, and business was dull. He went down to the harbour, where sailors were usually good customers, though they made an awful noise and he often got kicks instead

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of halfpence. When all else failed he tried the ale-houses, where one might be lucky enough to find drunken men who would buy the whole basket of cakes and throw them to be scrambled for by the street-boys. But Jonah, who did not drink himself, was disgusted by the stale stink of beer and by the men's coarseness of speech. He had to go from table to table and stand humbly offering his wares and giving these vulgar men flowery titles. He addressed them as Captain or Admiral, and they liked that, even if they told him goodnaturedly that they were only Boatswain—when perhaps in reality they were no more than cook's mate.

In front of one of these houses there was a colonnade where the customers sat in the shade and were waited on by girls who went round with pointed wine-pitchers and filled their beakers. Here sat two men clasping their clay mugs in tanned fists.

As Jonah went past he heard one of them say: "Gold? Why, by Hercules, I've seen more gold than any living man. If I had it here I could buy up the whole of Tyre. *Where* did I see it? I'll tell you. We sailed to the westward till we reached Spain, then we went through the strait with the Pillars and found the harbour where we landed by some mountains like—well, what

shall I say?—like those yonder!" He pointed to the mainland, where the sun was shining on the limestone mountains of Lebanon.

As the man uttered the word gold Jonah gave a start as if an invisible hand had laid hold of his cloak. His fingers curled at the mere thought. Gold—that was fortune in tangible form, unlike dreams. Jonah had never got beyond silver; but gold, that meant honour and

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power and glory! Silver was only a common drudge for buying food and clothing.

He did not dare to address these rough men, but slid down at the foot of one of the pillars and sat there with his basket on his knees as if he was taking a rest. In reality he was listening.

The man of gold spoke a dialect which showed he must come from Sidon, the city from which Tyre got its blue-water seamen. They were real sailors, with rolling gait and full of self-confidence, and they spoke with a drawl like the general run of Americans, rolling the words over in their mouths before spitting them out.

"Ah, gold!" said the man. "There's plenty of that in Tarshish—not just a few grains that it takes you a whole day to wash out, but lumps as big as your fist that it's worth stooping to pick up."

Jonah dared not stick his head out to see how big the lump was, but he had a fair idea of the size of a sailor's fist. He heard the other say with a snuffle: "By the Lord of Winds, that was a big 'un!" And presently he added: "How can you get to Tarshish?"

"It isn't an everyday trip," said the first man. "But there's a ship leaving in a day or two, and I'm sailing in her. She's called the *Evening Star*. Huge ship with two hundred rowers and a crew that don't give a damn for man, god or devil. And you've got to be like that, mate, if you're going on *that* voyage. What do you say? You know the sea? Oh, yes, you've splashed about here in the duck-pond round Egypt. No, you go out into the great sea past the Straits, then you'll know what the sea is! The waves are like mountains, and the currents are like rushing rivers. You say you've been through storms here. Well, of course,

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it does blow a bit sometimes in these waters, but if you want a storm you must try sailing in the Ocean. There the wind's enough to blow the hair off

a man's head. And then there's other things that it's not good to talk about, because people will call you a liar and you'll be fighting from morning till night."

"What sort of things?"

"There are sea monsters, swimming in shoals round the ship. There are cuttle-fish as big as a house. There are mermen with long beards and tridents that they stick through the ship's bottom when they're in a bad temper. There are birds that can pick up a whale in their claws and fly away with it!"

"Ah," said the other with half-drunken profundity. "There are many marvels in the world. Now I was sailing to Askelon one time—"

"Don't speak of Askelon and Tarshish in the same breath," said the first man scornfully. "No, Tarshish is the big draw now. People come from Egypt, from Greece, from Carthage, and all the way from India—black men, yellow men, white men, even Jews who are generally afraid of the water—but they've all got the gold fever. Gold fever, mate, that's the thirst that takes hold of men to get rich quick, no matter what it costs. And they can't help getting rich if they reach Tarshish alive and come home again!"

Now they were ready for a game and asked for a dice-box and a board. They played for a whole pitcher of wine. The girl brought the dice and joked with them in the hope of a good tip. The man from Sidon made rude remarks to her and she proved a match for him, so that the modest Jonah took his basket and stole away.

Jonah had heard something to make him think. He

was not exactly one to risk his life, but if it *had* to be done there was more sense in risking it to win a fortune than in suffering martyrdom. It was better business to go to Tarshish and look for gold than to make the journey to Nineveh. Surely there must be limits to the extent of the Lord's power, he thought. No doubt he can keep an eye on his subjects in these parts, where he can hover over Lebanon, but one can't believe he has anything to say on the other side of the Straits. *That* must surely be the realm of other and mightier gods, who would never allow the Jew god to interfere in their sway.

Jonah had a very vague idea of where or what Tarshish was; he only knew it was incredibly far away on the shore of the extreme Ocean. He was prepared to find himself in a land where he would have to fight with wild men, goblins and monsters. He knew too that he was as timid as a hare, and he didn't see how he was going to hold his own with people like the boastful seaman. But there was gold; that was the main thing! And gold means power and happiness! Just a few lumps of it would be enough to make his fortune, if he could get them home safely.

The mere thought of riches made him sick of calling his cakes and he made haste to sell off at reduced prices, so that he could reach Old Tyre before Ayuta and her husband came back from their factories. As soon as he had convinced himself that he was alone in the house he dug up his crock of silver pieces, put them in a leather pouch and tied it round his neck so that he could feel it on his bare skin and make sure it was still there. He had money enough for the passage to Tarshish and perhaps for starting a little trade in sandal-laces when he came ashore.

He placed the empty basket on top of the empty crock,

took his staff in his hand and tramped out of the city in the direction of Joppa.

III

JONAH KNEW Joppa well, and every time he came to the town he wondered what it was it smelt of, for he had no word for its scent. And there was nothing strange in that, as he had never sharpened a pencil. It was cedarwood that gave it its scent. There were masses of planks stacked by the harbour, waiting to be loaded into ships bound for Egypt. Cedar-wood was in demand everywhere, but especially on the Nile, where there was a lack of timber.

Joppa was a lumber town. From Lebanon the cedar trunks were brought on huge ox-wagons. Joppa and cedar-wood were so closely bound up with one another that one could not imagine what the town would live on if the cedar forests disappeared one day. Now the town is called Jaffa and sells oranges. In Jonah's time there was only a legend of a tree somewhere in the Orient, which bore golden fruit, but no one had seen or tasted it.

Jonah had walked all the way to Joppa and had not spent a single silver piece on the road. He had a bag with some dry cakes in it which his baker had given him at parting, and there were springs enough by the wayside. Now he could see one of the famous Tarshish ships lying in the port. Not alongside the quays—that would have been impossible—but some way out in the harbour.

A crowd of people stood gazing at it. Its name was the *Evening Star* and according to the ideas of that time it was an ocean greyhound. There were a hundred oars, and at each oar sat two slaves. There was a huge mast with a single square sail, almost as big as the market-place in

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Gath. It was hoisted with a windlass.

Jonah hired a boat to take him out to the ship. He climbed up a ladder to the deck, where a mate dashed at him, seized him by the cloak and was about to throw him overboard.

"We don't want any sandal-laces here!"

Jonah freed himself and said his intention was to book a passage. The ship was to sail the same evening.

The mate growled and took him to a man who had to do with the ship's finances. The vessel was a regular floating kingdom, and this man was the purser. He explained to Jonah what the regulations were. One had to supply one's own provisions, the ship only found drinking water. Considerable comforts were to be had, by those who could afford to pay. One could hire a pallet to oneself, otherwise one had to lie on the deck, wherever there was room. There was an extra charge, however, for lying on the top deck, where it was cool.

Jonah chose the cheapest class of all and paid in advance. The purser gave him a number and entered him on a list. He wrote: "Jonah, a pig of a Jew from Tyre." Of course he didn't know that Jonah could read. But Jonah said nothing; he was not looking for trouble.

He walked about the great ship, wondering how it was possible to construct such a marvel. He stood by the bulwark looking at the little bowl-shaped merchant vessels that lay far below, like shavings floating on the water. He descended to the main deck, where the passengers had already begun to take up their quarters. He peeped through the hatches down into what corresponded to the engine-room—the banks of rowers, where the slaves lay gathering strength for their work at the oars which was soon to begin. They chattered like monkeys, grinning

and noisy. What would their fate be if anything happened? Jonah shuddered at the thought of what might be in store for himself. He was one of those people who said like the Romans, that he who makes a journey by the sea when he could do it by land, deserves his fate if he loses his life.

Boats went backwards and forwards between the town and the ship. They were laden with people, cases, sacks, barrels of water and wine. Evening came on, the sun went down over the sea, and its last rays flushed the mountains. How long would it be before Jonah saw that flush again? And would he be standing on the upper deck alongside the captain as a man of substance, whom nobody would dare to call a pig of a Jew?

The ship was about to sail. In the ordinary way one did not go to sea at evening, but these ships of Tarshish considered themselves an express service, not to be delayed by weather, darkness or pirates. The people of Joppa stood on the quays waving, shouting farewells and wishes for a good voyage. The passengers flocked to the side and waved back. But the seamen went about their work with a surly indifference, as though they were heartily sick of all the fuss that was being made.

Now the captain came aft and ascended to the poop, where he stood giving orders. He was a mighty man, grim as one of the lions in front of Melkarth's temple in Tyre. He wore gold rings in his ears and a purple cloak. He alone knew the secret signs that guide ships through the sea. They were now to sail over waters without beacons or lights, left entirely to themselves, after they had lost sight of the little lode-star that was just being lighted at the pier-head of Joppa. The captain bent over the rail and called to the boats:

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"Away from the side there! Out oars!"

All the boatmen shouted excitedly, splashing away to reach a respectful distance. They could hear the clatter of the mighty oars, each as big as a ship's mast, as the slaves thrust them out through the ports, making the ship look like a bristling hedgehog. The hundred oars lay on the water, and the *Evening Star* became a huge aquatic insect, ready to run along the surface on its many legs.

The captain gave a fresh order, which was transmitted through a pipe to the rowers' deck. The slaves at the port oars began to work. The phosphorescence in the water shone like floating silver under the splash of the blades and the ship turned slowly, so that the prow pointed towards the harbour entrance. Again an order, and it was the turn of the starboard oars. The overseer beat time with his wooden club, and the slaves put their backs into it and sang the hymn to the god of the sea.

A man with a deep bass voice intoned the first strophe:

"Our sail is set; the sea foams at our prowl!"

Then came the chorus in shrill falsetto voices, shrieking like hoarse seabirds: "O Ramman!"—that was the storm-god.

The bass continued: "The heavenly stars will light us on our course!"

And the refrain came, like a negro spiritual: "O Ramman!"

There was a pause, in which the overseer's club could be heard like the beat of a steam-engine. Then a melting tenor took up the chant:

"The woman hung about my neck: Forget me not!"

"O Ramman!"

"The seas are treacherous. Shall we come home again?"

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Now it was the turn of the bass:

"Great monsters swim about the deep, the home of Tiamat!"

"O Ramman!"

"His eyes shine green, his throat is red as fire!"

"O Ramman!"

"Thunderclouds gather, pregnant with our fate."

"O Ramman!"

"Will they burst on us, shall we come safe home?"

Then the mate gave the order to ship oars. There was cursing and swearing as the slaves jostled each other with the unwieldy oars in the confined space. And the *Evening Star* passed through the harbour mouth, where there was no room to row. The ship glided easily with her own way, and the most persistent of Joppa's inhabitants were grouped out here by the fire-bucket waving their hands. The gleam of the open fire shone upon their brown faces, and their white teeth showed as they laughed.

Here the swell of the Mediterranean made itself felt and the ship began to pitch a little.

When they were clear of the land the slaves turned to again, to manœuvre the vessel so that the wind could fill the great sail. A figure of Astarte was painted on the canvas—the goddess of love, after whom the ship was named—Ishtar was the evening star as well as the goddess. As the wind filled the sail it looked as if the goddess was swelling about the waist.

An Egyptian merchant, standing beside the captain, made a facetious remark about this, but the captain disapproved and turned away. It's best not to make free with the gods when you're at sea.

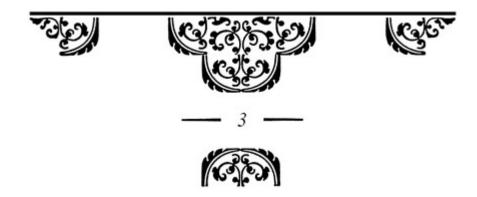
The beacon at Joppa was visible for a long time. At

first they could distinguish the red tongues of flame licking up from the great brazier, but after a while it was nothing but a little star on the horizon. And finally that went out. Now they were alone upon the sea. They would scarcely meet any ship, nor did they wish to. If two ships sighted one another at a distance and had no signals by which to recognize one another, they would take the precaution of altering course so as to pass at a respectful distance. And if one ship purposely closed another, the order was given to serve out arms.

Night came. Embers were kept burning amidships in a big box of sand and torches were laid handy, in case light should be required on an emergency. But no lamps were lighted. The mast towered up into the dark void and was lost there with no mast-head light.

The great ship rolled through the dark night. The wind was fair, so that the slaves could sleep calmly on their rowing banks. From the hatches rose the frightful stench of a hundred sweaty garlic-eaters. But the 'tween-decks passengers themselves didn't smell good, and they noticed nothing. They lay on the bare deck, rubbing themselves against the hard planks. The heat was oppressive and they envied the fortunate ones who could afford to reserve a pallet, on which they snored at their ease—or the still more fortunate who had the privilege of lying on the upper deck looking up at the stars and being cooled by the night breeze.

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But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.

Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god ... and they said, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.

n the daytime the 'tween-decks passengers were allowed on the upper deck, and when the night was past they all made haste to come up and have a sight of the sea. They turned to the east, from whence they had come, expecting to have a glimpse of the land; but the wind had been favourable and they had come so far that they could not even see the blue shadow of Lebanon. Around them lay the sun-lit sea, so fine and peaceful that the pious fell on their knees and thanked Shamash, Ramman, Poseidon—or whatever they called their gods.

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Jonah modestly came up last. He thanked no god. He made himself small, hoping he had slipped through the Lord's fingers, and he thought it a good omen that the sea was calm. It gave him a feeling of security that he was on his way to a region where the gods—if one might believe the Greeks—were a more cheerful set of people.

So still were sea and air that the ship lost way. The captain spat into the water and saw with his practised eye that the spittle slipped aft far too slowly. Man-power was called for. He gave an order and the rowers woke up, glad to get the morning stiffness out of their limbs. The oars came out,

the overseer beat time, and the men struck up the hymn to the storm-god, but to-day the words were extempore.

One of them sang in a cracked voice:

"I know a girl in Joppa born—"

"O Ramman!"

"Her snout's as sharp as a cactus thorn—"

"O Ramman!"

The passengers on deck unpacked their food and fetched drinking water from the ship's barrels. It was yellow and had a pungent taste of pitch from the caulking of the barrels. The sailors said it was wholesome.

The first-class passengers, who dined with the captain on the poop, had pitchers of wine sealed with wax. They had servants who poured out the wine, and they invited the captain to take a cup with them. But before drinking they threw some drops on the deck as a libation to the gods.

Now they were all chewing the dry wheaten bread. Some ate dates, or had honey in which to dip their bread, and afterwards their mouths were sticky and yellow. The

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sun baked their backs, and it felt quite pleasant to be gently rocked by the motion of the ship over the calm surface, disturbed only by the long swell. Far away they saw the outline of an island. The sailors said it was ruled by a monster with three heads who lived on men. "Horrible!" said the passengers with a shudder.

Jonah sat in a corner munching the last of the cakes the baker had given him. He was wondering how he was to feed himself for the rest of the voyage, now that all his cakes were eaten. He drank the yellow water in the hollow of his hand and thought it tasted abominably, but consoled himself with the reflection that all would be very different on his homeward voyage. Then he would be one of those who sat with the captain and listened to the yarns he told on every voyage to a new set of passengers.

Every stroke of the oars brought the ship nearer to the west. It gave them all a festival feeling, like a picnic on a summer day. There were little white clouds sailing close over their heads, so that it looked as if the top of the mast must touch them; and the ripples winked cunningly with a thousand gleams of sunlight, as though the sea were of blue silk strewn with diamonds. All was so hopeful that the passengers broke out into hymns in honour of the gods and were as happy as a choir of school-boys. They

swayed in time with the singing, each man praising the gods in his own tongue; and this cosmopolitan company had a kindly feeling that after all we are fellow-creatures when once we are released from the trammels of our homeland.

In the course of the forenoon a flock of birds came flying over the ship from the north-west, going in the direction of Egypt. A man who had some knowledge of

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the flight of birds called the captain's attention to this as a bad sign. The captain sent back a message that this was all nonsense.

Soon after a solitary bird came and settled on the mast-head. It was an ugly black bird with a red beak. It flapped its wings and cried hoarsely. Everyone on deck looked up in fear. The bird shrieked again, spread its wings and let fall a dropping with a smack on the deck. "Good luck! Good luck!" people shouted. The bird was scared at their cries, rose and flapped away.

It really looked as if it had brought luck. At any rate the rowers thought so, as the order was given to take in the oars. The sail was set, and the sailors sang a capstan chanty as it was slowly hoisted. Now the breeze was freshening; little waves appeared. Again Astarte swelled, and the gay pennon at the mast-head stood straight out in the air. The ship sailed on spankingly, the water foaming at her prow, and the captain rubbed his great hands and looked almost amiable.

II

DURING THE next few hours a comfortable feeling spread through the ship. The passengers were shaking down, so far as harmony was possible among Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Assyrians, Phœnicians, and blue-eyed men of doubtful nationality. In one corner a Chaldaean gambler was already at work with his dice. He was a regular passenger on this route and knew the crew, to whom he gave good tips for bringing him victims. Elsewhere some women were putting their heads together, confiding to each other their anxieties in coming to a strange land; but there had been no holding their husbands

when they heard gold had been found.

A dignified Egyptian priest paced up and down the deck in company with a Median merchant, engaged in a profound discussion of the order of the universe. A group of lively Greeks made merry over them. For the Greeks were wise men in their own way; they knew that they knew nothing; but this did not worry them, as they were in search, not of knowledge, but of adventure. They were soldiers about to enter the service of Carthage. The ship was to call at the great colony on her way.

Jonah sat with his back against the bulwark watching these people. There were many generations of desert blood in him, and when the ship gathered way and began to pitch heavily, he felt uncomfortable and unsafe. There was an uncanny sound in this constant creaking, as if the whole vessel were going to pieces. Cordage and wood-work gave, each in its own way, and the shadow of the sail wandered back and forth over the deck in a steadily increasing curve as the motion became more violent.

He got up and tried to walk up and down like the others, but the reeling deck gave him a queer sensation that first one leg, then the other, was too long. Everywhere he was in the way. He was flung against other passengers, and they shrank from him resentfully, as though he defiled them by his touch.

If he sat down on a coil of rope a seaman was sure to come along and say: "Out of the way, Jew!" They didn't speak like that to the others, but even here, where Jonah had paid for his ticket, he was looked upon as a person to be bullied. Just because he was a Jew and a poor one! A rich Jew, who was also on board and had his own cabin, carefully avoided the proximity of Jonah. He was afraid this miserable countryman might beg.

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Now the ship was rolling so heavily that every moment the waves could be seen above the bulwarks. They showed white crests of foam, but as yet these had quite a gay look when the sun shone on them. The wind was refreshing. Jonah heard a woman ask a sailor if he thought there was any danger. The sailor smiled.

"This is grand weather," he said; "you couldn't wish for better. Look how the ship flies through the water. And how easily she's lying."

In the course of an hour the wind had steadily increased. The clouds were now thicker. At first they had been like a white veil, but when the sun was gone they grew dark, with a colour like wet sacking. They lowered heavily over the sea, and far off there was a curtain of rain. It was squalls lashing the water.

The captain began to think that perhaps those birds were a bad sign after all. He knew there was an Egyptian priest on board. He sent for him aft and asked him to perform a sacrifice to the gods of the sea. A live lamb was brought up from the lowest depths of the ship—for there was a hold underneath the galley-slaves. The lamb was quite dazed and rolled about the deck; the seamen dragged it up to the poop, the priest washed his hands, and two seamen held the animal while he cut its throat and caught the blood in a copper bowl. He muttered a few words and threw the blood into the sea. Everyone looked over the side, as though expecting a miraculous dead calm in an instant; but as the sea raged as before they consoled themselves by saying the weather must be given time to moderate. Then the priest opened the animal and took out the liver. It was healthy and of good shape. That was a good omen. He was able to declare that they would reach their destination safe and

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sound. The seamen shouted the good news to the passengers, who were standing about the deck in anxious groups. The lamb was cut up, and the priest was given the hind quarter that was due to him.

But the storm grew worse and there was such a strain on the great sail that the captain gave orders to shorten it.

All the passengers were pushed out of the way and the seamen cast off the halyards. But the sail refused to move; it was forced against the mast by the pressure of the wind, and there it hung, as if nailed fast. Suddenly a rope snapped—the sail slid down on one side forming a huge bag which instantly filled with the wind and became unmanageable; no human strength could hold it. With a rasping sound the sail split; a long strip was earned overboard and dragged after the ship like the broken wing of a waterfowl. The sailors had to cut the sail with their knives, the torn leech fluttered away and vanished in the sea, while the captain raged and swore that the man in charge of the rope should be scourged.

The slaves on the rowing-banks were at work again. They clenched their teeth, set their feet against the bank in front and pulled at the oars with all their force. It was hard work in that heavy sea. To make it worse, every moment the sea took an oar out of the hands of a pair of men, flinging them

down between the banks, while the shank of the oar worked in the narrow space, sweeping the next men over. There was shouting and confusion.

The sea was like a swing; the waves came on like huge green mountains of glass. Although the ship had a high freeboard they swept in through the oar-ports, threatening to drown the rowers. The ports had to be closed, leaving just a crack for the oars, but then the slaves shouted that they couldn't breathe. The order was given

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to ship oars, and then the vessel lay tossing like a cork. She turned in her own length, till a sea-anchor was rigged and thrown out forward, which made things a little better. But all the passengers were seasick and paralysed with terror. Between vomitings they called upon their gods.

The seamen stood with a gloomy air staring at the sea. There was nothing to be done but to let the ship drift till the worst was over. But that, too, was dangerous, for every now and then she was struck by a sea running dead against her and hammering at her side like a gigantic fist rising from the deep. That shook all her timbers.

Hour after hour went by without the storm abating. It grew worse and worse. Some experienced travellers among the passengers got together, went to the captain and said he must do something. But what was he to do? Against storms and stupidity even the gods fight in vain, the proverb says.

They thought there must be some means of satisfying the gods. What was the use of sacrificing a lamb in a case like this? Perhaps the gods demanded a greater victim. There must be some man on board who had incurred their wrath. Find him and throw him into the sea!

"Ah, find him," said the captain; but how? We're five hundred souls aboard this ship; which of them is the man?"

"Let the lot decide," said the spokesman.

Ш

THE PURSER was set to work writing numbers on little slips of parchment. Every passenger had a number on his list, corresponding to the number on the slip. The number that was drawn would show who was the unhappy

man who had offended the gods. When the work was finished the slips were brought up to the captain. He placed them in an empty honey-jar and, with the few weather-proof passengers as witnesses, he drew out a number and handed it to the purser, as he could not read himself.

A rapid glance told the purser that it was Number 16—the Egyptian passenger who had made an insulting remark about Astarte. That hit it! But this passenger's conscience had troubled him and he had already been to see the purser and squared him in case his number should turn up. And the purser had another name ready. He said: "It's 87!" And with that he let the wind take the ticket overboard.

"Turn up the list," said the captain. "Who is the accursed?"

The purser made a show of looking up the name. Then he said: "I've got him. Jonah—a pig of a Jew from Tyre."

"I thought as much," said the captain. "These Jews are a lot of vermin. They bring bad luck. They ought to be wiped out!"

He was himself a Semite, born in Sidon, but he was blissfully ignorant of racial theories. He thought he came of better stock than the Jew. "Bring him up!" he thundered.

Two seamen went below to look for Jonah. The poor fellow was seasick, kneeling down and knocking his head against the ship's side and calling upon the Lord. He said:

"I know it! I have sinned! I ought to have gone to Nineveh, but the greed of gold seized me and now I am on my way to Tarshish, where I have no business to be. For what does it avail a man to have heaps of gold, if

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thy hand, O Lord, is against him. I promise I will turn back—just as soon as I have found enough gold to pay for a decent passage in the ship. I will go to Nineveh! And I will speak the things with which you inspire me, cost what it may! But forgive me, Lord! For I waited in vain for the sign. If only you had made a little tiny miracle happen!"

Just as he was praying thus the two men laid hold of him and told him he must come on deck. He struggled against them. He was at that stage of seasickness when nothing mattered, so long as he might be left in peace. Even if the ship went down it would not move him, for existence could not be more unbearable. His stomach was like a pump working the wrong way, and his head was held in an invisible vice which was trying to squeeze out his brain through his eye-sockets.

When he reached the deck he was as helpless as the lamb that had been sacrificed a few hours earlier. His feet dragged after him and he befouled the deck with green bile, for his stomach was now perfectly empty. They pulled him up on to the poop and threw him down at the feet of the captain, and there he lay like a bundle of rags, miserable to look at.

"Your name is Jonah?" said the captain.

"Yes."

"Have you done a murder, stolen something or spoken lightly of the gods?"

"Never," said Jonah. "But do with me as you will. I feel so wretched that death will only be a relief."

The captain informed him that they had cast lots and that the lot had fallen upon him. The gods had singled him out as the man responsible for the storm.

Then Jonah understood that this was the sign from the

Lord. He confessed his grievous sin. He told what the Lord had demanded of him and how he had fled from his fate, but now it seemed that the Lord had caught him after all. He begged the captain to sail in to the coast, so that he might land and make his way to Tyre and thence to Nineveh.

But naturally the captain could not entertain the idea. He said that the gods demanded a victim and left it to Jonah to decide in what way he wished to be sacrificed. The Egyptian priest was appealed to and thought that properly speaking Jonah ought to be cut open with a stone knife and his heart taken out. But Jonah said he would prefer to be thrown into the sea. It was cleaner and not so painful.

He made ready his soul and exhorted the others to take a lesson from his example. He grew pathetic over his fate and remembered his old father, the respected scribe in the city of Gath. He pronounced a regular funeral oration over himself, until the captain became impatient and said they must get to business. The customary washing of the victim might be omitted; they could leave that to the sea.

The seamen took off his kirtle, and naked as he came from his mother's womb he staggered to the side. He looked out at the sea and was terrified. Mountains of water rolled everywhere, rising and falling. He had never imagined the gentle blue Mediterranean could look so angry. And gulls

flew shrieking round the mast-head. The great ship seemed no bigger than a plank in the sea, but still it was a plank he clung to.

In a moment he would be sprawling in the air and would disappear in the deep like a fly falling into a milk-can. He would struggle in the waves till he was tired.

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Then with limbs relaxed he would sink through a green infinity. And once more the deep, as though in jest, would release him and let him rise to the surface—perhaps a second time too—but then it would be all over. He would sink deeper and deeper into darkness, silence and death.

And what then? Is there a life after this? And if there is, what can a man look for who dies with God's curse upon him?

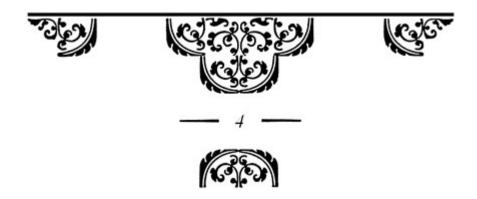
"Get along," said the seaman. "You're not afraid of the water, are you?
—jump!"

Jonah took a run towards the side, but then the deck rose on end before him and forced him back.

"Out with him," said the captain.

The sailors took him by the arms and legs, swung him a few times in the air till the right moment, then they let go of him and he went overboard in a handsome curve.

He hovered for a second, then struck the water. The crest of a wave lifted him so that he had a view of the ship's deck; but he was sucked back at once into the trough. Now he was lying at the bottom of a green cauldron, splashing wildly in his attempts to swim. Once more he was raised on a crest and saw that the sun had broken through; then he was back in the depths and a thundering sea broke over him, forcing him beneath the surface like a pitiless finger drowning a flea in a basin of water. He gurgled frantically and swallowed a whole ocean of sea water. Then he lost consciousness.



Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights....

And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon dry land.

he most difficult part of Jonah's story is that about the whale. But then it wasn't a whale at all! It was a sea monster—called by some Leviathan, by others Tiamat. Some day, when the Mediterranean has become a raised sea-bottom and the geologists of the future dig into it, they will find the bones of the great fish and will put them in a museum, and people will say: "So it was true after all!"

There is a place on the coast of Sicily where the cliffs descend vertically into the sea for a distance of many miles. It is a desolate region, but peaceful, as no ship can put in there. On this perpendicular wall of rock there

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grows under the surface a kind of seaweed like a broad ribbon, which may attain a length of twenty yards. On these ribbons there is a mass of little airbladders which keep them up, so that they lie free, giving the appearance of green hair growing on the rock. The current plays gracefully with the ribbons, which look like the paper streamers people throw to one another in a carnival. A swarm of little silvery fish dart in and out among the ribbons, as neat and rapid in their flight as swallows hunting midges.

This is the home of Leviathan or Tiamat. He might be caught if one baited a liner's anchor with an ox and used a steel hawser as a line with half

a score of traction engines to pull it in. However, Leviathan doesn't eat oxen; he is a vegetarian. He grazes peacefully along these cliffs.

He is as big as the biggest whale, but his head is like that of a pike. Nature has arranged it so ingeniously that he has a projecting lower jaw which he uses as a steam-navvy uses its iron scoop when eating earth.

Leviathan lies perfectly still three or four fathoms below the surface. You can see him from above through the green water, looking like a supersubmarine. He gives a little stroke of his tail and drives his mighty body so close to the cliff that his lower jaw touches the rock. Then he eats his way upward; it looks like a barber cutting hair with the clippers. He clears the seaweed right in to the rock, leaving a broad streak where he has fed.

Thus the giant fish may spend a whole day eating himself fat. In spite of his size he is a gentle fish. He does not stir more than is necessary, and his sidelong motion through the water is accomplished by very slight strokes of his fins.

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As he is a real fish and not a mammal in disguise like the whale, he has two big round stiff eyes. Here one can say with truth that they are as big as mill-wheels, if it is the wheel of a water-mill one is thinking of. The simile is the more apt as Leviathan is in the habit of rolling his eyes with pleasure as he eats. These eyes have no lids; the water is in direct contact with the lens, as if it were the glass of an aquarium. They have an unpleasantly rigid look and appear to give off a green light.

The fish grazes for hours together, with the splendid calm of an animal that knows no enemy. For who can do anything to Leviathan? He feels perfectly well, swaying gently in the water, like a zeppelin moored to a mast. Now and again clear silvery bubbles pass out of his mouth, bubbles as big as children's toy balloons. He chews quietly in sabbath calm, taking not only the seaweed but the fish and crabs clinging to it. Everything vanishes down his gullet, which, unlike the whale's, is as spacious as a main drain. Now and then he comes across a snag and his mighty jaw breaks off a bit of rock; then he has to work it out with a scouring sidelong movement of his mouth.

The only small thing about Leviathan is his brain. It is enclosed in a bone capsule just under the crown of the head, and if taken out it would fill an ordinary saucer. That is not much for so many tons of flesh and bone.

But it is enough for Leviathan, who has nothing to do but eat seaweed and digest it.

In this brain vague impulses arise, and the fish simply follows them without questioning. And now a thought was flashed down into the deep, and in Leviathan's brain it took the form of an order. The great fish broke off his meal at once, took his bearings like a carrier pigeon

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at starting, found the direction and dashed off through the water at full speed. He went like a torpedo.

II

AS JONAH lay struggling in the rough sea there was not a thought in him. Life is merciful enough to make us entirely forget our fears in the moments of greatest danger. All the vital force Jonah possessed was centered on the task of splashing in the water to keep himself up. Apparently it was quite hopeless. But Jonah did not *know* this. On the contrary, he was buoyed up by a blissful feeling of hope; for every breath he drew confirmed the fact that he was still alive.

But then against his will he began to drink sea water. It ran down his throat and he could not get it out again. And now he sank into the deep with a new felicity—the feeling that the struggle was at an end. Just as one feels on the operating table when the anæsthetic begins to take effect. It is not such a bad thing to die—perfectly delightful to get over the inevitable! Lovely to float away into nothingness, where there is no pain!

But Jonah was not to die. The great fish was on the way, like the rescue party in the last reel of a thrilling Indian film, where one sees clouds of dust in the distance, as the riders draw near. Leviathan thrashed through the water with his mighty tail-propeller, and as he glided forward his huge body was tickled by the rush of water past his sides. And in his little brain there was something resembling joy.

Now he had reached the spot and checked his speed. He took a turn round the unconscious man who was still sinking into the depth, got below him and opened his vast gullet, so that Jonah dropped into it as a ripe pear drops into the fruit-gatherer's bag. So there he was! Leviathan closed his mouth and expelled the superfluous water through his gills. And Jonah slipped through the great throat, giving Leviathan the sensation of having swallowed the yolk of one of the roc's eggs.

Meanwhile Jonah had come to himself, and his experience was like that of a man who had returned to his mother's womb.

Leviathan was one of those creatures that date from a time when the Almighty had not yet got his hand in, as anyone can see who looks at the pictures of prehistoric monsters. They show neither the right proportions between their limbs nor the finely adjusted mechanism that more recent creatures gradually acquire. Everything is still in the experimental stage. And it seems as if in the joy of creation the Almighty had amused himself by producing the monstrous in preference to the utilitarian. Little by little he learns to turn out living organisms that achieve their end by simpler means.

Leviathan's internal arrangements were somewhat old-fashioned—a trifle complicated. When he had shovelled in ten or twelve swinging cartloads of seaweed and considered he had had enough, the whole mass lay in an outer stomach. And there the seaweed began to ferment of its own accord. There was no gastric juice or other corrosive fluid in this stomach, or it would have looked bad for Jonah. On the other hand there was plenty of air—fine, germ-free atmospheric air, given off by the innumerable little bladders that floated the seaweed. It afforded Jonah an excellent opportunity of drawing breath. There was in fact so much air that from time to time the fish

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had to allow some of it to escape, and then the great bubbles rose to the surface.

Leviathan was already on the way to the destination appointed by the Lord, and he went at an incredible speed. Jonah of course did not notice this. All he felt was that he was sitting in a vast cellar where wet seaweed was stored for some purpose impossible to grasp.

When this seaweed fermented it formed a huge ball—like the fibres that are strained off in making rhubarb fool—and a valve opened leading to the next stomach where digestion proper took place in a gigantic cauldron filled with a substance of the same strength as nitric acid. The ball passed

into this, and its further progress concerns the natural functions, into which we need not go.

Leviathan was in a hurry. He did not know why, but the Lord did. Jonah was to be delivered at his destination before the valve sprang open and the next stoking of the digestive stomach was due. If Jonah once arrived *there*, it would require an actual breach of the laws of nature to rescue him. And the Lord did not like this. He was like the great conjurors, who have their rules for performing a trick in the best professional manner. Not too much apparatus; sleight of hand is more distinguished.

Jonah had seated himself on the lukewarm mass of seaweed and was trying to make out what had happened. He remembered the ship, the storm, and the scene on deck with the two sailors who seized him with hands like blacksmith's tongs and flung him overboard into a seething vortex of white foam and green water. And there he lay in a swing which alternately threw him up to the sky and dragged him down to the depth, until the

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moment came when he sank. Perhaps he was now in the Underworld. Perhaps stern judges would appear and would take the heart out of his body and place it in the scales, as he had seen them do in the pictures of an Egyptian's Book of the Dead.

He waded about in the piles of seaweed and found there were crabs among it, of no particular size, though they might be troublesome enough to a man with bare toes. He arrived at the end of the cave and felt at its walls. They were sticky and clammy like the entrails of a fish. At last he found an outlet—a kind of shaft or tunnel leading out of the cellar in a gentle upward slope. He tried to squeeze through the elastic swallow, crawling on hands and knees, and Leviathan felt this as anyone might feel a crumb swallowed the wrong way. The monster made a gulping effort and its mighty muscles forced Jonah back into the cave.

There he lay once more on the wet seaweed, raising his hands to heaven. With the fervour of a sacred hymn his words took shape, and the Bible has preserved them:

"I cried by reason of my affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me," said Jonah. "Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.

"For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.

"Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.

"The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

"I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever."

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## III

BUT NOW the moment had come when Leviathan had reached the end of his journey. In a mighty eructation of air and vapour Jonah was shot out like a cork flying out of a beer bottle. He was flung through the monster's open mouth into the water. He just had time to see the light, the sea, the waves—and he had a glimpse of the red throat from which he came—when the surf caught him and carried him towards the shore, till it dumped him on the beach as a man flings down a heavy sack.

There he lay; his head rested on a pillow of brown sun-dried seaweed, and by his side lay cakes of stranded jelly-fish which would soon dry up into a veil of shrunken jelly. He lay as still as a drowned corpse, for he had lost consciousness with the blow as the wave slung him in. He was a wretched sight with his sunburnt face and his sun-burnt hands and feet and his skinny yellowish body, which showed plainly how far his clothes had reached. His arms lay limply on the sand and he had drawn one leg up under him.

The sun shone straight in his face. And as sand is hard lying and his body was sore after its buffeting in the waves, he often had to turn over with a little sigh. But that was a good thing, for then the sun could dry his back.

At last he opened his eyes, and his first thought was that new horrors awaited him, so that he hardly dared to open them wide. But as nothing happened and there was a blessed calm all round him, he sat up gazing before him with the idiotic expression of a man who had been hit on the head with a club.

Before him was the sea, blue and smiling and twinkling

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roguishly with a thousand little ripples, like a lake on a calm summer day. The sea is capricious, as we know; it changes swiftly from frowns to smiles.

The sea? he thought. Last time I saw it there was a world of watery mountains, a chaos, a foaming roar. Where am I now?

He felt the warm sand. So he had come ashore. And the thought of having dry land under his feet put life into him. The miracle had happened. The Lord had given the promised sign. Jonah was saved!

But a look of despondency drew down the corners of his mouth. He was saved—but in order that he might go to Nineveh. There is no such thing as unmixed joy in this world.

And just then he was struck by the furtive idea that perhaps it wasn't a sign at all. The whole train of events had been perfectly natural. He had been thrown overboard. There was nothing extraordinary in that. No storm ever threatens the safety of a human community without its throwing a Jew overboard, if there happens to be one handy who can be given the blame for it with any shadow of probability. And a fish had swallowed him up. But that was the fish's affair, its means of livelihood, so to speak. And it had spat him out again. But what of that? The whole thing was capable of a natural explanation.

I am a free man, he thought, and I can go where I please. Perhaps I'm stranded on one of the Fortunate Isles. Perhaps it's altogether impossible to get to Nineveh from here. And possibly I have come to a land which is under the rule of another god.

He sat there adjusting his ideas and was vexed he hadn't asked for his money back before they threw him into the sea. Now the rest of them were on their way to Tarshish,

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sitting on deck and eating dates and drinking wine and talking about what they would do when they came to a land where they would find gold.

He stood up, and his knees shook under him, making him like a jack-inthe-box with spiral springs instead of legs. He had landed on a narrow stretch of sand surrounded by high chalk cliffs. There was not a blade of grass nor a drop of fresh water. He could not stay there. And he staggered across the sand and clambered up the cliff, higher and higher, till he had a view of another stretch of coast. But even before his head rose over the top of the cliff the gentle breeze brought him a whiff of a familiar scent. It was the stench of rotten mussels. He checked himself an instant, thinking: It can't be! Then he raised his head and looked over the edge of the cliff. Yes, upon my word, it is! Over there lay Old Tyre with its dye-works, its tar-boilers, its glass-blowing works and its cabins, straggling all over the place like a mining camp.

And here he stood stark naked! A dream he had sometimes had on cold nights, when he had kicked off his sheepskin, now came true. In his dream he walked proudly along the street in his nakedness and nobody was surprised, but that couldn't be done in reality. How was he to show himself in Tyre?

Then the Voice spoke within him, saying: "You have done with Tyre. Go east! Go up through the mountains! Go to Nineveh!"

"Stark naked?" said Jonah sarcastically.

"Go east!" said the Voice.

"Without clothes—without money?"

The Voice made no answer. The Lord had a way of talking to Jonah as orders are passed to the kitchen in a restaurant, short and sharp, and the hatch is banged down

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again. He did not enter into long discussions. He said curtly: "Go east!"

"Good!" said Jonah. "Now where is the east?" He looked at the sun, he looked at the moss on the cliffs, got his bearings and discovered a little path leading up into the mountains, and he began to walk in the hope that he might soon come to a spring, for he was very thirsty after all the seawater he had swallowed, and he wanted a bath, for the unpleasant sour-sweet smell of Leviathan's stomach still hung about him.

He moved like a sleepwalker. Now it was for the Lord to take the lead. A little farther on he came to a spring. He drank from the hollow of his hand, rinsed his mouth and uttered thanks, as was his duty. But it was all done quite mechanically.

He walked on. At a turn of the path he stopped suddenly, scarcely able to believe his eyes. Something was lying on the road. A suit of clothes. A linen tunic and a cloak of camel's hair! There now, the Lord was coming to his senses. Jonah picked up the clothes and felt the material. It was of the poorest quality. Well, isn't that like him? he thought. But at heart he

sympathised with this sense of economy. He put on the clothes, and they fitted him.

What about sandals? Actually they were not necessary, as Jonah was so used to going barefoot that he had regular slabs of horn on the soles of his feet. But a hat. Wouldn't it be a good thing to have a hat?

Hardly had he thought of it when the hat lay on the path before him. It was one of those pointed hats of plaited straw that were worn by mountaineers. Why not a felt hat? It would last much longer. But Jonah dared not fall out with the Lord, and he said a trifle hypocritically:

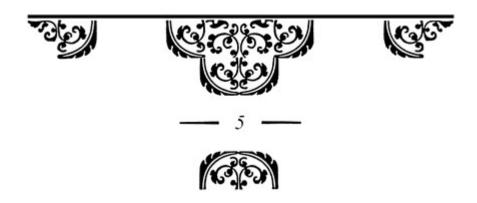
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"Of course you know best! And now I have only one more modest little request. Couldn't I find a purse with a few pieces of silver—and perhaps just one gold piece—or three? One always needs money on a journey. And as there's no knowing what will happen when I get to Nineveh, this seems just the moment when I require a little encouragement."

The Lord made no answer, and Jonah walked on with his eyes on the path before him. No purse appeared. For a whole hour he kept his hope alive. But as still no purse lay upon the road, he understood that the Lord had some design of his own. He intended Jonah to go to Nineveh without money—and that in an age when no one had yet found out how to go round the world by selling post cards.

Jonah sighed, but he walked on. On and on!

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So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

onah had taken up his staff—a long branch of olive—and he tramped towards the east.

He did not shine as a pedestrian, and found walking under the hot sun very fatiguing. So he rose early in the morning and walked in the feeble light of dawn, while it was still cool.

He had made his way over the mountains. They were trackless, but luckily the mountaineers were decent folk, and as he possessed nothing worth stealing he was unmolested. On coming to a village he sat down in front of a house and began telling his story. The natives found all that part about the ship, the storm and the great fish specially interesting, and he was given food and lodging gratis. They treated him like a travelling lecturer.

But when the mountains were left behind and he came

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to the flat country, his difficulties commenced. It was all he could do to keep body and soul together until he reached Damascus, where there were ten thousand Jews, many of them wealthy. He stayed there for several days, going about as a travelling journeyman in the prophetic line and begging funds for his journey. He saw the celebrated arms factories, the great bazaars and the thousand eating-houses. The place swarmed with Assyrian warriors, who gave the natives to understand that they were masters of the country, and he had the unpleasant impression that it would be difficult to convert them.

When Jonah proceeded on his journey he had the whole hem of his cloak sewed up with pieces of silver. But on the road he fell among thieves. They turned him upside down looking for valuables, but the Lord made them blind, so that they did not find the silver pieces. In revenge they amused themselves by beating him so that he lay unconscious for several hours, after which they mounted their horses and rode away singing like the chorus of an opera.

Towards evening he was roused by a hungry roving dog sniffing at him, greatly disappointed to find he was alive.

His ambition was to arrive in Nineveh without having to draw on his money, and in this he succeeded.

He met wandering swineherds who offered him pork on the spit, but he declined it and contented himself with a handful of dried dates. The simple folk took him for a holy man and begged him to lay hands on the sick. He did so, mumbling a few unmeaning words. That brought him more silver pieces.

Once he was attacked by a lion, which suddenly sprang out of a thicket and fell upon him. He was rolled over in the dust and never forgot the rank smell of the

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beast of prey lying on top of him. But some men came up on camels and killed the lion. He was saved again—but why always at the last moment? Can one understand the Lord? How much easier it would have been to leave the lion entirely out of the story.

Jonah had grown as thin as a rake and was so dirty that people bowed before him in reverence. He positively enjoyed sitting at the wells telling his story, which he had embroidered with many poetic details. They brought him pleasant gifts and begged him to tell them some more. And Jonah told them more. He didn't think there was any hurry about getting to Nineveh.

But then the voice of the Lord came upon him and adjured him to mend his pace. "What is the idea, my son? Will you or won't you?"

When he reached the river Euphrates it was just the season when it is swollen with green water from the melting of the snow in the mountains. The broad meadows were white with ranunculus, and huge flocks of herons were fishing on the bank.

Jonah inquired at the ferry what it cost to be taken across as a person of rank, rowed in a boat. The price was very high, but the ferryman explained that poor people had a cheap way of doing it. They could hire a goat's skin and blow it up; then they lay down on it and swam across.

Jonah was provided with a goat's skin. He kept the mouthpiece in his mouth, so that he could blow it up again if necessary, and so he went to sea on his bagpipe. But it was a cold trip. When he came to the opposite shore, a good way below the ferry, his feet were quite numb from the ice water. And he sat a long time in the sun to thaw them before he could resume his journey.

He had now joined the great caravan road, on which

there was traffic. The country was arid and still thinly inhabited, but at each caravan station there was a crowd of people, and like the practical man he was Jonah tried to make himself useful and was hired as a camel-driver.

Jonah became a member of a great caravan which was bringing arms for King Sargon, who dwelt in a newly built palace outside Nineveh. At first Jonah was afraid of his camel—though it should rather have been the other way round—but there is something crafty and malicious about camels. After a while he learnt how to ingratiate himself with the beast by scratching it with a stick on the hairy part of the chest, and they got on very well together. There was only a little trouble in the morning, when the camel was packed and had to get on its feet. It shrieked and refused to rise. It had to be spoken to seriously and given a kick at the psychological moment—then it automatically got on its legs, and once started it went steadily on to the next halt.

Jonah walked at its side. The sun shone on the remains of his straw hat and his eyes were fixed on the reddish sand. He could hear it crunching under the animal's pads. He caught the sweet smell of the great warm body, and he felt downright sympathetic as he watched it swinging along on its thin knock-kneed legs, breathing heavily like a sorrowful soul that had to bear too great a burden. He sighed himself. On him too a grievous fate had been laid.

In front and behind him other camels and other camel-drivers marched in a long chain. Now and again they sang a sleepy lullaby—always the same.

He raised his head and looked out across the plain, where the air quivered in a heat haze. Straight ahead he saw some cliffs towering above the flat country. The sun was shining on them and they reminded him of the limestone

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mountains of Lebanon. He called to the man in front:

"Say, mate! What are those mountains ahead of us?"

The other man, who was tired and irritable, said without looking round: "Mountains, you ass—that's not mountains. That's Nineveh!"

Good God! thought Jonah. Is the city really as big as that! I shall vanish in it like a needle in a haystack.

In the course of the next few hours the city took shape, so that he could see by its straight lines that the mountains were composed of brick and raised by human hands. But the heated air still distorted the picture, so that it looked as if a sea of waves separated him from the city.

"When shall we get there?" he asked.

"About evening," said the other.

They jogged on, men and camels, with the declining sun over their heads.

II

JONAH WAS now to see Nineveh, but it would take time. Nineveh was immense. Like all the great cities of the world it had grown around a kernel—a cell—the original Nineveh; and gradually it had expanded into a Greater Nineveh, which covered so much ground that it was a three days' journey to go through it.

This vast community lay on the left bank of the river Tigris. The country between the two rivers of Paradise, the Tigris and the Euphrates, was as we know one of the most ancient of the world's civilisations. Where its people came from is obscure. To begin with Adams and Eves lived in these parts; they ate of the fruits of the land, gave names to the beasts and communicated with each other in

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friendly growls. They must have been fairly dark, lumpish, long in the arm and short in the leg, to judge by the slaves who were their descendants. And

even now one may find people in these parts with the melancholy eyes and the loose-hanging hands of apes. But the state of innocence has left them. They have grown wicked, since for thousands of years their narrow-gauge brains have been in conflict with superior types and they have always got the worst of it. That has made them fawning in their speech and evil in their hearts.

The country was made fertile by the inundations of the rivers. People had the idea of building their houses on artificial mounds, as they did later in Holland and Ditmarsh. The mightier the builder, the bigger was the mound on which he built. Thus it became a mark of nobility to live on an eminence. You could tell from the foundations who owned the house. But the houses of gods and kings were of course built on the highest foundations.

The people who first cultivated the land and enslaved the Paradise folk came from the mountains. For the fertile plain is surrounded by mountainous country. And from that time on the whole history of the country is a narrative of the mountaineers' successors, who stayed at home among the hills and heard with envy of the easy life enjoyed by those who had gone out and taken possession of the plains. They sat for centuries waiting for the conquerors to grow effeminate in the great cities. And when the moment arrived, the people from the mountains invaded the plain and founded a new kingdom.

That is why we hear of Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Medes, Greeks and Arabs ruling in turn, and we picture the country as a big house where the tenants move

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in and out in successive terms. But it was not like that. The people—the patient labouring people—stayed on through millenniums. The cabins did not change their tenants, only the palaces. Even the temples remained for ages.

But the conquerors knew that for them too the hour would come, and so they fortified themselves. Every town was a vast area laid out as a fortress behind walls forty feet thick. No one could starve out a town which had streams abounding in fish, great cornfields and deep wells. When one of these towns fell the disaster was usually brought about through treachery. It was either the nobility or the priesthood that had lost confidence in the ruler. And when the town fell the old ruling family was killed off without mercy, as the drones are massacred when there is a revolution in a beehive.

We must imagine Nineveh as a gigantic fortified village. It had mighty walls with lofty gates, it had temples, palaces, parks, mansions, broad roads and extensive gardens—but it also had slum quarters with dust-heaps, stables, open fields and workshops.

The palaces and temples were on such an enormous scale that they gave the city its stamp. The wall was as high as a six-storeyed house and broad enough for several chariots to be driven abreast on its top. The palaces rose above the walls, and the temples again towered above the palaces. Each temple enclosure contained a clumsy pyramid which looked as if it was built of a child's box of bricks—a temple tower which commanded the surrounding country. For this kingdom was a hierarchy, like Egypt. It was ruled by the will of the gods, and their will was known to the priests.

Certain parts of the great city were centres of trade

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and industry. There was the artisans' quarter, the Jews' quarter, the Greeks' quarter, all the elements of the genuine oriental town, with alleys so narrow that if two camels met, one of them had to go back before the other could pass. Here was noise, dirt, the hum of humanity, the hammering of tools and the bleating and braying of beasts.

But there was no real traffic problem in Nineveh, for nobody was in a hurry except the rich, who had nothing to hurry for, and the men who were engaged in the service of the King. All the rest took life easily. They worked, but they didn't work themselves to death. And they moved about as little as possible. People lived and died in their own quarter. Only on certain holidays they got up early in the morning and made their way to a temple or a great square, where something was to take place—either a religious procession or a military parade. In the ordinary way they lived like rats who have their regular round among the dust-bins.

Seen at a distance the outline of Nineveh was something like New York. There were the same mountains of masonry, only here they built in limestone and clay, whereas New York builds in steel and concrete. But seen from an aeroplane Nineveh would have had the appearance of a thinly inhabited suburb, and every palace, every temple, every rich man's mansion, concealed behind lofty walls, would look like a fortified place within the city.

This picture was a light crayon drawing. For it lay beneath a sky which was a concentrated dome of sparkling blue light. The houses and the earth radiated heat. The clay was pulverised under men's feet and rose in great clouds of yellow dust when the wind blew.

Heat, dust and flies were what plagued the ordinary man in this city. The dust was so fine that it penetrated

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everywhere. It tickled people's throats and made them drink several pots of beer in the course of the day; unless they were among the unfortunates who had to be content with water or the yet more unfortunate who were well enough off to be tempted to quench their thirst in heating wine.

Ш

THE CARAVAN to which Jonah belonged had worked its way nearer. The camels were tired and announced the fact in little angry cries. The men were tired too, but they held their peace. They had now reached the first cultivated fields, and before them lay the suburb on the right bank of the Tigris.

There was a palm grove on the outskirts of the town. There the caravan halted and unloaded its goods. It was met by the merchants from Nineveh who were to take delivery of them. Next day the camels would have a rest, before starting again for the west with fresh loads.

Jonah took leave of his camel. He had grown fond of it in the days they had tramped together. He rubbed its muzzle and spoke kind words to it. The camel listened and turned its wise eyes on him. He had been a good keeper. And now they were to part. Such is life.

The leader of the caravan had paid Jonah what was due to him. Jonah was now a free man and hurried away, making for the great stone bridge leading to Nineveh. He followed the broad avenue of palms in which the Damascus road ended, and when he came to the bridge he stopped and leaned against the parapet, lost in admiration of the imposing sight before him.

So this was Nineveh, and he was to inform it of the

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Lord's—the little Jew god's—displeasure. Now we shall soon see what impression the views of Jerusalem make on the great city.

The river flowed rapidly under the arches and the fishermen drew in their nets. There was a glitter of silvery scales as they got them into the boats. What a river. What wealth! Everything here was immense.

He looked at the mighty town walls descending vertically into the water, which reflected them. On the parapet above marched sentinels looking like tiny dolls. He could hardly imagine that these walls had been raised by human hands. And behind them rose other buildings, palaces and temples, peaks of brick and marble. On their perpendicular walls were painted curious ornaments in blue and white. These were the national colours—the dust and the blue sky.

A bearded old man stopped and began chatting with him.

"I see you're astonished, stranger," said the man. "Ay, to be sure there's enough to astonish you here. There's no city on earth to equal Nineveh. Not even Babylon."

He pointed out the royal palace with his stick. "And there's the temple of Ishtar! And there the temple of Shamash! And the temple of the Moon! Of course you can't see much from here, and they say there isn't a man in Nineveh who can boast that he's seen all there is to be seen in the city."

The sun was sinking. In the dry atmosphere it could not turn really red, only yellow like a watermelon. But it lent a lustre to the clay walls that made one fancy they were of pure gold.

And now the priests began to hammer on the great sacrificial cauldron: *Bim—bam*. The air quivered with

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the vibration of the great vessel; other temples answered. They were ringing the sun down.

"We must make haste," said the old man. "It won't be long before they shut the gates, and then you have to pay to get in."

The idea alarmed Jonah. He stepped out so that the old man could not keep up with him. He reached the end of the bridge, where the avenue of palms was continued up to the great gate which was called the Damascus Gate.

And now the town wall rose before him like a cliff. The gate was raised some height above ground level and one had to go up a ramp to reach it. This slope swarmed with a living mass like an anthill on a sunny day.

Those who wanted to leave the city were just as eager to get through the gate as those who were trying to enter. The two streams met and there was fearful confusion.

The gate was like the entrance to a human hive. It was so high that the biggest elephant could go through with a castle on its back. On both sides were colossal figures of human-headed lions, and these were so big that the soldiers standing on guard beside them only reached as high as their paws.

The gate was of great depth, like a hall; for it was not only a vast entrance—it was an institution containing guard-rooms and courts, where the authorities of the quarter assembled to discuss the affairs of the city. Hence the expression "the Sublime Porte" which for thousands of years has been a designation of oriental governments.

As Jonah entered the gate he was carried along on the human stream which rocked its way in with noisy shouts. He found himself in a crush of ox-wagons, camels, horsemen on restive mounts, peasants with loads on their backs and a herd of swine that was being driven out of the city.

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Along the walls of the gate stood men with whips. They directed the traffic by striking indiscriminately at any knots that formed. And they did it ruthlessly and with a grim delight. There was a good deal of whipping in Assyria; it was a part of military discipline and a necessary one, since the ranks contained too many of the sort that answered better to a kick than to a word of command.

Soldiers armed with lances stood on raised platforms. They were dressed in linen tunics of many folds, to make them shot-proof, and these were covered with metal plates, giving the men the appearance of great shellfish. They surveyed the multitude with the unapproachable look that sentries know how to put on. And they thought a good deal of themselves, though the soldiers got flogged even more than the civilians. It was the army that was the guarantee of national greatness.

At the height of the third storey was a niche where an officer in a red cloak sat in a chair superintending. Just as Jonah had passed through he gave a sign and the slaves in the side courts tramped round the capstans to turn the mighty doors into place. They were closed without the slightest regard for any men or animals who might be caught between them.

Immediately inside the gate the roads spread out fan-wise into the city. There was room to breathe. But Jonah was bewildered, not having the least

idea whether to turn to the right or to the left.

A man who sat by the roadside selling bowls of soup with bits of meat in it, offered one to Jonah, who seated himself on the ground by his side and while eating asked the way to the Jewish quarter. But it was difficult to direct him. Great avenues ran through Nineveh, but the inhabitants used the many little alleys that led round houses

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and fields. The avenues were only for taking walks on holidays.

Jonah walked at haphazard. He chose the road on the left, seeing that it led to a thickly populated part, and soon he was in a busy trading quarter. But now darkness was falling and the traders were packing up their goods and moving into the houses. All day long they had been sitting outside. They answered his inquiries with a curt gesture of the hand: "The Jewish quarter is that way!" Then they went in, and he had a feeling that the town turned its back on him.

He walked on through narrow streets. It was a poor quarter that he was in, and except that the houses were not built in several storeys it resembled the parts of Tyre in which he used to sell cakes. There were the same alehouses and eating-houses full of people.

In Tyre everything smelt of fish; here it was a bitter-sweet smell that he was at a loss to identify. After a while it dawned on him that what the city smelt of was dried camel-dung. Wood being so rare in this country, they used the dung for fuel.

As he stalked along, his legs stiff from much walking, he was filled with despondency at the immensity of this city which surpassed anything he had imagined. It was simply endless. When he had walked for an hour, still asking his way, he was given the same answer with the same gesture: "That way!"

"How far is it?" he asked. "A long way," they told him.

It was now dark and the streets were empty of people, though the city had by no means gone to rest. There was whispering in every house he passed, and from many of them came the sound of stringed instruments. But nobody showed himself. They had withdrawn and shut

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themselves in. Or they were sitting on the roofs enjoying the cool air.

Nineveh was like a fantastic enchanted city in the moonlight, which made everything unreal. He came to an open space in front of a palace, which must have belonged to a very distinguished person, as two armed men marched backwards and forwards in the moonlight, guarding the house. He approached them to ask his way, but as soon as they set eyes on him they brought their lances to the charge, saying: "Keep off!" He drew back in alarm, realising that the streets of Nineveh at night were no safer than those of Tyre. This taught him to keep in the shadows.

He came into an endless avenue of palms, and was driven nearly mad by the succession of shadows cast by their slender stems, as regular as a pattern. Then came open fields on both sides, where beasts were grazing. Farther on a new quarter came in view.

Could this be the Jewish quarter? He sniffed and became aware of a penetrating smell of roast pork and onions. So it couldn't be here! He dragged himself on. He saw a man on the other side of the street—a man who like himself kept close to the walls. Jonah crossed over towards him, but the man fled.

Jonah felt so unspeakably lonely and forlorn in the vast city that he gave it up. He had come to a great temple, and he sat down under a tree, resting his back against its stem, and tried to go to sleep. Some dogs roaming about came and sniffed at him. He chased them away and slept.

In the course of the night the moon had travelled across the sky and shone upon him through the branches of the tree. He awoke at the sound of singing. It came from the temple. A procession of white-clad priests was on its way

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up the external steps leading to the first platform of the tower. He watched the tiny white figures advancing up the long flight; now they had reached the platform. They proceeded in a long line round the pyramid and came out on the other side, singing a plaintive chant all the time. Then they began to ascend the next flight. Jonah wondered at its being part of their ritual to get up in the middle of the night and crawl up the pyramid, but doubtless it had some significance. He saw them on platform number two, but there were five more before they reached the house on the top, and he fell asleep again.

Thus passed his first night in Nineveh.

MORNING CAME. The weather offered no surprises at this time of year, and the sun never failed to rise in a cloudless sky. The relative coolness of the night would soon be changed to the heat of the day. But there was an hour of morning freshness, enjoyed by all creation. All but the evil-doers rose early in Nineveh.

Jonah woke up, stiff in the limbs. He looked about him in bewilderment and then remembered where he was. Sleeping in the open was nothing new to him, and he stole across to the other side of the street, where the sun shone. There he sat down, to wait till people were about.

His surroundings were just like a stage scene for *The Caliph of Baghdad*. Where Jonah was now sitting was a huge yellow set with a door—a house. A little farther back on the same side was the corner of another house, sticking out. There was no great regularity about the streets of Nineveh. Immediately opposite was the great sycamore tree under which he had slept, and behind it again part of

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a house, with battlements surrounding its flat roof. Birds were chirruping in the branches of the tree, busy with their young.

The back-cloth represented an open square in Nineveh, with the endless wall surrounding the temple. Some gaily painted facades could be seen behind the wall, fading off into fainter colours, like the work of an expert painter. And then there were the traditional palms rising behind the wall and expanding in tufts of leaves like a bundle of rockets bursting into a dull green.

All the buildings were of the same sun-dried brick. Every house turned its back on the street, and its little door was narrow and strong as that of a fortress.

Behind him some big waders snapped their broad beaks. They had slept on the flat roof and now they made off in the direction of their feeding ground, the meadows by the river. A little black-faced monkey appeared on the next roof and peeped down at him between two battlements. And now the humans were also beginning to stir. He could hear the padding of the slaves' feet and the flapping of their masters' slippers. There was a bustling within the houses. He still did not know what quarter he was in, for there were no signs on the houses and no name-plates on the doors. But then he heard a voice praising the Lord in his own tongue.

A man had ascended to his roof and was intoning a prayer with his face turned towards Jerusalem. He drawled out the last word of each verse like a dog howling:

"O Lord, before the mountains were brought forth and before the rivers ran, thou art God!

"O Lord, the sun ariseth and goeth on its course, and thou dost guide it by the strength of thy spirit.

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"O Lord, thou art eternal, there is none beside thee. Look down on me in mercy and direct my path."

When the voice ceased speaking, Jonah answered from the dust below:

"He brought thee up out of Egypt and gave thee the land of thy fathers. Great is the Lord.

"Unto this day he has kept the breath of life in thee. He will uphold thee until the time cometh.

"Lord—Lord—Lord!"

The man who had been praying on the roof heard this voice and hurried down. His slippers clattered, and in a moment there was a jangling of chains, bolts and locks. The door was opened and the man came out.

He was short and fat, with a big nose and thick lips. He had a bald head and a venerable beard. On seeing Jonah he was shocked to find himself in the presence of a piety that seemed so destitute. He took it as a bad sign that a man who could praise the Lord with such fervour had had no better luck.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Jonah. I am from Gath. My father is chief of the congregation in his quarter—"

Alas! thought the other, the son of a chief elder, and he's covered with dust and as thin as a dog in rutting-time. He must be the black sheep of the family. He's come to beg alms.

"I," said the man with dignity, "am Manasseh, chief elder of the congregation in my quarter. Who told you where I lived?"

"Nobody," replied Jonah. "Yesterday evening as the sun went down I entered Nineveh. I wandered about at random till nightfall, but the Lord

guided me, and now I am here."

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This man's a pernicious swindler, thought Manasseh. He who is guided by the Lord doesn't have to hang about a man's door like a starved rat. Him too the Lord had guided, but the Lord had made him a silk-weaver and had given him four female slaves, who were now sitting at the looms, and the Lord had made him chief elder and had distinguished him in many ways.

"What do you want of me?" he said in a discouraging tone. "I am a poor man. And the congregation is poor. Every day Jews arrive in Nineveh thinking they will make their fortunes. We can't help everyone."

"I do not need help," said Jonah. "I have silver pieces sewed in the hem of my cloak, and I need not have slept in the street, but that I wished to save. Moreover I am a learned man. I can read and write three languages, and I could easily earn my living if I chose to take service with a merchant; but I have my own aim in life. I have wandered far; I have sailed the sea; I have seen great places. The Lord has led me marvellously. And I come of a family that the Lord speaks to."

Jonah uttered this speech in the purest language and with great dignity. Manasseh was quite impressed, and said: "My house is yours! Step in and be my guest. We will see what the congregation can do for you, if you have occasion for its help."

They entered the dark ante-room and closed the door. Manasseh led the way. He raised a curtain and they were in the rectangular court where the looms stood, and where the four female slaves—who bore no resemblance to beautiful odalisques—were at work under an awning of blue and white stripes.

"The colours of the country," said Manasseh proudly. "You must know, friend Jonah, that here much may be

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forgiven—all may be forgiven—but you must always praise the greatness of the country and of the King, and never let it appear that there is anything in the world more important or greater than Assyria."

Manasseh took Jonah into another room of the house, where he met Manasseh's old wife and his young concubine. He was given milk and bread and made comfortable, as they all sat on a carpet and took the first meal of the day. Jonah told his story. Every moment the others clapped their hands together, saying: "The Lord is great!" Manasseh was convinced that his visitor was either a holy man or an arch-scoundrel; but as Jonah didn't ask for money, he was inclined to believe in his holiness.

They went out into the veranda surrounding the court. Each took a bast mat and they sat down facing one another, in such a way that Manasseh could keep an eye on the slave women. Jonah now told him the purpose of his mission. They spoke Hebrew, so that the Syrian slaves could not understand them.

"A word came to me in the night season," said Jonah. "The Lord spoke to me and said that I am to go to Nineveh and announce to that great city that he is angry, because of its wickedness. He commands it to repent. And if it do not repent he will destroy it in forty days, so that not one stone shall remain upon another!"

At this Manasseh grew uneasy. It is never a good sign when the Lord sends messages. He is a hard God and demands hard service of men.

"The Lord is mighty!" said Manasseh. "He knows all that is done on the face of the earth. Can it be that the Lord does not know Nineveh? Who dare take upon himself to destroy this city? Where is the army that is great enough to capture it? Are not the Assyrians the greatest

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warriors of the age? You should see their war-chariots—their endless ranks of fighting-men—their camelry! In this country war is a science. When the army is on the march and comes to a river it has men ready to throw a bridge across it in the twinkling of an eye. They carry with them everything they need. Don't imagine they fight like a band of desert robbers. Everything is well thought out. That makes them always victorious!"

"But if the Lord were to turn his hand against them, he has many ways of subduing them. Can he not send the Angel of Death and smite them with pestilence?"

"Certainly, certainly!" said Manasseh. "To the Lord nothing is impossible. But why, friend Jonah? Because the Lord in his wisdom never wills the impossible! But what do you wish us to do for you, since you are not in need of subsistence?"

"You must tell me how I can best set about my task. To whom shall I address myself? Shall I begin with the poor or the rich?"

"That is a difficult question," replied Manasseh reflectively. And to himself he added: And a very dangerous one, if it should come out that one was in league with this man. "But go out now, friend Jonah," he said, "and look at the city. But take good note of the road, so that you can find your way back. Come here about noon, by then I shall have taken counsel with pious men of our congregation, and I shall give you our answer."

V

JONAH WENT out to see Nineveh. He saw a great number of temples, palaces, parks and market-places. He went from one quarter to another, and they were all alike.

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There were the same yellow walls and dusty palms and rounded trees with leaves burnt almost black by the sun. His head went round and he felt like a modern tourist who tries to see a great capital in five hours from a motorcoach, but only gets an impression of vastness and confusion.

In the course of his wanderings he came to the world-famous bazaars. Here he felt at home. There was a buzz of human voices, and business was being done. This appealed to him. He stood aside and enjoyed watching a carpet-dealer spreading out his wares and assuring a customer that they were genuine Persian carpets. Jonah, who was a connoisseur, could see that they were a bad imitation; but he could not help admiring the man's eloquence and the skill with which he held the carpet so as to show it off.

He went to the booths of the metal-workers, where they sat in the street tapping with little pointed hammers and turning out the same patterns they had made for a thousand years. And woe betide him who should try to introduce a new one. His business would be ruined.

He stopped at the booths of the dealers in spices and recognised the heavy perfume he knew from the halting-places of the Arab caravans as they passed through Gath on their way to Tyre.

He could not tear himself away from this lively scene. Trading was in his blood, and it would have made him happy to sit here selling linen to fine ladies borne in litters and accompanied by slave-girls, who came up and carried the parcels. But the fine ladies were not happy to see this camel-driver so close to them, and the owners of the booth, suspecting Jonah to be a bazaar thief, got a slave to drive him away.

He went to the market-place, where peasants from the country round sat on the bare earth letting the sun scorch their glistening shaven heads. There was bustle here: carts rumbling, oxen bellowing, camels squealing and ringing the little bells fastened to their harness; but all seemed distant and unreal in comparison with the loud clatter of Tyre. There the wheels crashed over a rock, here the soil was alluvial clay. This deadened the sound pleasantly, as though the streets of Nineveh had been laid with felt. But the traffic raised the dust, and the peasants coughed continually as they sat by their wares.

Jonah still felt superfluous, as on board the ship. He was pushed out of the way; the traders gave him sour looks, as he took up room and bought nothing. He stole away and returned to the Jewish quarter—for he had cautiously gone in a circle, so as not to get too far away from Manasseh's house. He stopped before a cook-house, where in a huge earthenware cauldron lentil soup was being boiled with delicious quivering lumps of ox fat in it. He was tempted to buy a bowl and eat it with a piece of black bread. But he resisted. He would first see whether Manasseh would not invite him to dinner.

Suddenly there was a disturbance in the narrow street. A procession was approaching. Two gigantic negroes ran in front with sticks in their hands, shouting, "Make way! Make way!" They pushed everyone aside regardlessly, and they could do this at their pleasure, knowing that only common people went about the city on foot.

It was an envoy from India on his way to the palace he was to occupy during his visit. His arrival was like a regular circus parade of elephants, camels, apes, grinning negroes and solemn bearded Indians in white turbans. But the envoy himself was unseen. He sat behind the silken

curtain in his palanquin, and it was far beneath his dignity to look out. He had come to a land which was far inferior to his own in culture, and it offered nothing worth looking at.

Jonah was squeezed up against the door of a house, and in spite of that there was a camel that trod on his naked big toe. When the Indian envoy had passed by, the envoy of the Lord stood rubbing his toe, which hurt pretty badly. A camel is no light weight. Then the door opened, a slave came out and hit him over the head with a rotten cabbage-stalk which went

to pieces on his old straw hat, and the slave exclaimed, "Miserable stranger, who has given you leave to defile this wall with your despicable shadow?"

Jonah stole away, boiling with anger. There was something about this city that irritated him. It was not that the people were selfish and greedy to make money, or that they drew a sharp line between those who were useful to them and those who were not. That was right and proper: it was Jonah's own view. But these Ninevites were possessed of an unnecessary cruelty, a hardness which delighted in trampling on others, a desire to bully and victimize—it was evidently a national characteristic. Every slave to whom power was delegated used it mercilessly against anyone whose state was more pitiable than his own.

And the people of higher rank were full of arrogance. He remembered the look those ladies in the bazaar had shot at him with half-closed eyes. As though they had chanced to look upon something disgusting which made them feel sick. And yet he was a human being, even if there was nothing to tell them that he was one of the Lord's chosen.

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## VI

WHEN THE sun shone vertically and the shadows of the palms were shortest, Jonah approached the silk-weaver's house. He knocked, and the concubine came and let him in, saying with an air of mystery that Manasseh was waiting for him.

In every Assyrian house there was a room on the left of the entrance which the master of the house used as a reception-room. Jonah raised the curtain and entered. On the floor sat Manasseh and two venerable Jews. These were the elders he had summoned. All three sat on a carpet, looking solemn.

Manasseh had told them: "An extraordinary thing has happened. This morning, when I opened my door, a man of strange appearance was sitting on the threshold. He says his name is Jonah. He is from Gath, and he declares the Lord has sent him a message. The Lord commands Nineveh to repent."

The old men had nodded. They had always said that Nineveh was a city where vice was rife. It was extremely probable that the Lord was angry with Nineveh.

"But," Manasseh went on, "it appears that this man proposes to go about the streets telling people of the wrath of the Lord. And what will happen then? What will the priests say?"

"They will say the man is mad!" said one of the elders.

But worse things than that might happen. There was always the lurking danger of a Jewish persecution. Manasseh could not explain why—no Jew can explain it, since they are unable to understand the cause of the hatred. But there it is, latent and smouldering, and it takes very little

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to make it flare up. And when Jew-baiting starts, its first victims are the lucky ones who have amassed money. So the elders of the congregation put their heads together and worked out a plan.

When Jonah appeared they were agreed upon what they would say. But with Oriental subtlety they did not go straight to the point. They greeted him and invited him to sit beside them on the carpet.

"You have now seen something of Nineveh," said Manasseh. "What do you think of the city by daylight?"

"It is great and wonderful," said Jonah. "It is not a city, it is a whole kingdom. But it was almost more wonderful as I saw it last night in the blue moonshine. You must know," he said, turning to the two others, "that I arrived so late that I could find no lodging. The nights are mild, and I decided to sleep under a tree."

They clapped their hands together and the oldest said, "Who would lie down to rest in a lions' den?"

Jonah did not understand this. He only thought what a strange feeling it was to be the only man awake in the sleeping city. He saw nobody in the streets.

"Nobody!" exclaimed Manasseh. "It is estimated that every night there are thirty thousand homeless in the streets of Nineveh—and that means thirty thousand murderers and thieves. You were indeed lucky."

"The Lord was my shepherd!" said Jonah.

"Verily!" said the two old men.

Then Manasseh came to business.

"Friend Jonah—we three, who are the elders of the congregation in this quarter, have discussed your case. We understand that you are a good man's son, a learned man, a believer and a man of caution. In every way you are a man after our own hearts. Far be it from us therefore to

cast you out, even though you come to us in the guise of a poor man. I myself have been poor. I came to Nineveh as a camel-driver, and only because the Lord has blessed my labours have I become a man of substance. But the Lord will also bless your labours. And now you will find that he has already done so.

"But, my dear friend Jonah, you must have misunderstood the call you have received from the Lord. For the word of the Lord is wisdom, and there can be nothing unreasonable in him. He does not ask the impossible of any man.

"What is it you will proclaim to Nineveh, friend Jonah? You are here among men who count themselves the bravest, the most capable, the wisest in the whole world. Perhaps they are, perhaps they are not. But they have their temples, their priests, their vessels of gold, their dancing girls and their wonder-working images. Nay, more than that—they have fortune on their side in war and peace. And to these people you intend to say that all they believe in is idolatry and vanity? We know that you are right, but will you ever get them to believe it? They love their errors and their vices, which afford them so many joyful hours. They love strong drink and beautiful women, and they deny themselves nothing. They do injustice to many, that is true—but they will go on doing so as long as it pay them. They will listen to no denunciations, either from their own people or from strangers. They have paid taxes to the King, and that gives them the right to fleece their inferiors, and they pay dues to the temple in order to escape trouble in the next world. They have their own gods, and they will not be moved by what a foreign god in a foreign land thinks about them and their doings."

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Jonah threw out his hands in the curious gesture characteristic of his people, like a double wing-beat, and said: "But the word of the Lord stands fast. And the Lord has said: 'Go to Nineveh!'"

"And you've gone!" said Manasseh.

"Yes," said Jonah. "Here I am."

"Well, that's excellent. The Lord wished to try if you were an obedient son. That you have proved yourself to be. So what more does the Lord desire? Nothing! The Lord now says to you: 'Go Back to Tyre, my son. Be happy *there*!'"

"No," said Jonah stubbornly. "The Lord says nothing. He has given no sign."

"Here is the sign!" said Manasseh. He produced a little bag from the fold of his mantle. "Here are a hundred pieces of silver which the congregation bestows on you, on condition that you return to the place from which you came. It's a big sum, friend Jonah."

Jonah looked at the bag and thought it was no bad sign. But he knew very well that the Voice that had spoken to him did not mean anything of the sort. Lie could see that these Jews were afraid of getting into trouble on his account and wished to bribe him to go away. He said: "That is not a good sign."

Then one of the elders suggested: "Perhaps it would make it better if we added another fifty pieces of silver?"

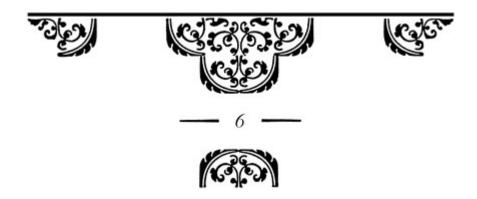
"So let it be!" said Manasseh. "And now listen, friend Jonah, to what we have decided for you. You can stay in Nineveh for a fortnight and see the place, then you won't have made the long journey for nothing. Nobody would ask that you should come to Nineveh one day and leave it the next. But if you do not accept our offer we must count you the enemy of the congregation."

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Jonah thought for a moment and then said: "Make it two hundred pieces of silver and I'll accept your offer. Then I must try to get out of it with the Lord as best I may. Let this be upon my head and not upon yours!"

"Give him the money," said the most venerable of the three elders, "and let him depart in peace, and let us get back to our business."

They shook hands on it, and Jonah swore by the holy Name that he would go home when the fortnight was over.



As the partridge hath hatched eggs which she did not lay: so is he that hath gathered riches, and not by right. In the midst of his days he shall leave them: and in his latter end he shall be a fool.

hey accompanied Jonah to the door with Oriental politeness. They bowed before him so that the hem of their mantles trailed in the dust; they gave him honeyed smiles, they flung out their hands as though strewing invisible flowers, they cocked their heads fondly to one side. He was treated like an important customer leaving a shop where he had been done down.

When the door was closed and the heavy bolt shot, they mopped their perspiring foreheads and said: "Praised be the Lord that we are rid of that crazy fellow. He might have ruined us all!"

Then they seated themselves under a great tree, speaking words of wisdom and stroking their long grey beards with beringed and black-nailed fingers. They sighed as they said: "It was a lot of money—a lot of money—but

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there's one consolation, the congregation will have to pay it."

Outside stood Jonah with his two hundred pieces of silver and his bad conscience. He held up the bag and heard the pleasant chink of the coins. Though the sound was as faint as the scraping of an insect on a dry leaf, it was enough to drown the voice of conscience. With his business instincts he was glad he had not accepted the scurvy sum they had offered him at first, believing him to be a dreamy fanatic. But they used to say in Tyre that

it took ten Assyrian Jews to cheat a Phœnician. And they believed that was an empty saying!

In reality he was not so cock-a-hoop as he tried to imagine. The thought that he was absolutely alone in the vast foreign city made him quite downhearted. He didn't know whether to turn to the right or to the left.

He looked up and down the street. It had nothing to say to him. There was nothing to show that it led to any particular place. It was one of those streets one sees in a bad dream—two endless rows of low walls with here and there a house-front—without windows—only doors that are small and narrow, as though forbidding one to enter—and all closed at sunset—presumably barricaded within from distrust of those who are abroad at a time when honest folk spread their prayer-carpets to thank the gods who have protected them for one more day in the midst of a murderous world.

Fate willed it that he turned to the left, without thinking that in Nineveh this direction was accounted unlucky. From the moment he had been false to his call he was without guidance, like a blind man who has lost his dog. He felt he must find some place where he could reflect in peace what to do with the two hundred pieces

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of silver. They were to be the spring-board to launch him into the world of his dreams—where one sows pennies and reaps pounds, manuring the soil with the sour sweat of imbeciles.

The sinking sun coloured the sky an ochre-yellow with streaks of red like the jam inserted in a cake yellow with eggs, but darkness fell quickly in this country. The yellow sky changed to green in the east. The blue-black shades of night rose in the western sky and were drawn over the earth like a hood.

Jonah wandered through streets which were all alike; all were deserted, all the life of the city was confined within closed doors in an almost hostile seclusion. No shop was open, there was no one to show him the way.

Then the moon came out and revealed a new world, quite colourless, in which the yellow city was transformed into an Indian ink drawing, glaring white and deepest black. But it appeared ghostly and distant.

Jonah walked and walked among the same inhospitable houses, wondering whether he was not going in circles in the labyrinth of alleys. He walked barefoot through dust and dirt. He trod on rotten cabbage, on dead cats, on offal thrown out of the houses; and he experienced all the

sensations possible to a foot, from treading on an overripe tomato to smarting at the encounter with a sharp potsherd. He was scared by half-wild dogs, who growled on being disturbed in their meal and slunk into the shadows, where their green eyes shone with a phosphorescent glare.

Had he been a light-minded heathen with two hundred pieces of silver lying near his heart, in the fold of his cloak just above the belt, he would have looked for

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an alehouse and made a night of it. But Jonah came of folk whose instincts told them what money was worth, so long as one could resist the temptation of spending it. He pondered whether it would not be wise—and cheaper—to sleep once more under the placid moon. There was not a breath of wind; the earth gave off a torrid heat; he would be as warm as under a roof. So, as the alley made a sharp turn, leaving a corner where one could make oneself comfortable, he decided to go to rest. He sat down, drew his straw hat over his eyes to keep out the moonbeams, and thought: This will do for me!

He had a whiff of cooler air, fanned by the wings of the great bats that flitted along the hot wall to catch the insects that settled there. Their faint cries sounded like animal voices from another world. Jonah smiled. They had hunted in the same way in his father's house at night, as he lay on a reed mat under the olive-tree looking up at its branches, where the fireflies darted backwards and forwards flashing to one another in bright zigzags.

All the same, this was not like home. There was something in the atmosphere that made him uneasy, a dry tension, so different from the moist night air of the maritime country. He was charged with an electricity that could find no discharge—everyone here was so charged—that was what made their voices loud and irritating. At home they quarrelled too, but that was rather for the sake of letting off a surplus of vitality; here there was a substratum of malice, as though they all hated one another. In every other house people could be heard squabbling in shrill voices and saying the most frightful things.

And the moon was so intrusive. It shone like an impertinent

and inquisitive searchlight, penetrating his straw hat and his eyelids, so that he had to shade his eyes with his hand.

Another thing was the strange insecurity of feeling he was in the middle of a vast continent—a feeling that it might swallow him up—that he might vanish altogether among all these people. He missed the great unresting sea that lapped the shore of Tyre. And he missed the fishy smell.

It had been a remarkable and a fatiguing day. He had gone through so much that he felt like a tired reveller on a roundabout in a fair. A succession of images floated before him—booths, bazaars, animals, men, some at work, some heavily armed and stalking about with an imprudent look, humble old women selling watermelons—and houses, houses, houses—miles of long yellow walls with little narrow doors.

All this swam before him in a mist, and he had reached the point when the soul goes into its chamber and shuts the door behind it in order to be alone with its dreams; but he was overtired, and every time he was falling off to sleep he woke up with a start. A hard hand had knocked at the iron gate of consciousness.

Then it was that the voice of the Lord said to him: "Jonah! Is it thus you obey my commands? For miserable silver you have betrayed the call I gave you!"

But Jonah, who had seen the great city and moreover had two hundred pieces of silver in his purse, had grown in spirit, so much so that he thought he could look down on the Lord. He said: "We are in a foreign country which has its own gods, and it's no use trying to force your commands on me. I don't intend to go back to the old country, so anyhow we shan't have anything to do

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with one another in the future. I'm going to make for Babylon, and *there* I shall place myself under the protection of the foreign gods."

Like everyone at that time Jonah thought the gods of the heathen were just as real as his own god, and that it was only enmity and rivalry that made them speak disparagingly of one another, like the kings when they went to war. No doubt it was one's duty to keep to the god under whom one was born, but not so as to prevent one from renouncing him and taking service under a foreign god, just as a warrior might enter the service of a foreign king.

The Lord answered him: "Will you abandon the God of your fathers? Have you forgotten that I freed my people from the yoke of Egypt and drowned Pharaoh's host? I might just as easily have done the opposite, if it

had suited me to punish the disobedience of those I had chosen. If you fail me now, it is you who will suffer for it. Think not that you can escape me by going to Babylon. You belong to me, I have power of life and death over you. Better go to Manasseh to-morrow, give him back the two hundred pieces of silver and say you must needs obey me."

"No—that's out of the question!" said Jonah. "I've made my choice, and I'm no turncoat. What have I got out of serving you, may I ask? Have I had anything but affliction, fear and hard work? Now I want peace. This country's gods are stronger than you—look at the palaces they live in. When all's said and done, you're no more than a little tyrannical tribal deity ruling over a terrified people. Mind your own business and let me look after mine!"

Thus did Jonah answer the Lord, and he did it with a

kind of savage defiance, guessing that it was a dangerous business which might cost him his soul. He stiffened himself with insolence, so as to be ready to receive the lightning-stroke he expected. But the voice of the Lord was silent—and that was uncanny enough. He would have preferred an argument. Now he felt that something was gathering in secret over his head.

All the same, business is business, and he could not feel depressed for long, since he was in funds. Of course he would have to keep his promise to Manasseh and leave Nineveh, but the world is wide. It was his intention to make for Babylon, which compared with Nineveh was what Paris is compared with Berlin. Babylon was reputed to be a frivolous city. There money is easily come by, thought Jonah; where fools come to market the wise man is the gainer.

He felt in his bosom and pulled out the bag of money. Once more he would count the coins, not because it was necessary, but simply to feel the joy of letting them slip through his fingers and caressing each separate piece of silver before letting it drop. They were all there!

Then he began to build castles in the air, like the woman with the basket of eggs. I shall get a place as a camel-driver, he said to himself, so the journey won't cost me anything and I shall be safe from robbers. When I arrive in Babylon I'll take a job as waiter in an eating-house. But not a Jewish one—no money to be made *there!* Then, when I've had a year at the eating-house and have got to know the customers and ingratiated myself

with them, I shall open an eating-house of my own right opposite and station myself at the door, calling out: "Come, my friends, come to Jonah and grow fat! Here you'll be feasted like princes."

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Perhaps I'll hire a fat man to go round the streets and squares, calling: "Look at me! I eat at Jonah's." One must have ideas to get on in the world. Customers don't come of their own accord in our time, and it takes a lot of customers to build up a business big enough to give a real profit.

One will have to have slaves; that is the way to wealth. Nobody gets rich by the work of his hands alone. One must know how to set others to work. And while they are toiling and sweating I shall sit in the innermost recess of my cave using my intelligence and thinking out a way to set things going. Brains are what matters, after all.

An eating-house is a wonderful concern. One lives gratis on what the customers leave, so that everything is pure profit. There'll be an entrance direct from the street, and the cook will stand under a lean-to roof preparing the food, so that the smell of it will be an advertisement pursuing them with the pertinacity of a crier. It will tickle their nostrils and make them stop and think: Lamb's liver?

There will be the glorious scent of fat beef that quivers as the cook lifts it on his spit. And I'll have an earthen pot of the fine white sauce to be poured over the blue river fish, like a veil or a light cloud through which you can see the summer sky. From within the house will come an enticing odour of wine heated with cinnamon and beer with tamarind—deliciously bitter-sweet!

Jonah slipped away from reality: now he was in Babylon. He passed among his guests, with a condescending word to the poor and a respectful inquiry of the well-to-do whether the food was to their liking—but no need to ask that. Listen to them guzzling bowls of soup—listen to the faint smack as a thick-lipped man gulps down

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a fat lump of meat—the kind of sound you hear when a snake slips down the throat of a stork.

The enjoyment of food was pious and peaceable; it promoted benevolence. Jonah smiled in his sleep. His hands hung down limply, his lower jaw was relaxed and the corners of his mouth dribbled. For it made his mouth water to dream of veal and lentils. He smacked his lips; but then he seemed to retire farther into the land of dreams—he became quite motionless and expressionless—only his chest heaved softly with the purse of two hundred silver pieces, where his soul now dwelt.

Some time went by, the moon sailing on its course. In the house behind him there were whispers and people bent over the edge of the roof to take a look at him. Soon after someone touched him on the shoulder—very lightly; he thought it was a little animal, perhaps one of the inquisitive lizards, and he tried, half-asleep, to brush it away, but came in contact with a hand, was seized with mortal terror and woke up altogether.

"I'm a poor Jew," he mumbled. "Don't do anything bad to me!"

A gentle voice spoke kindly to him. On hearing it was a woman's voice he grew calmer. She had come out of a little door close at hand; it stood open and a subdued light fell upon the alley.

"Do you mean to sleep here all night?" asked the woman.

"Mayn't I?" said Jonah meekly.

"It's not good to sleep in the street," she replied. "My mistress is a pious woman who cannot bear to abandon you to the evil spirits that haunt this place at midnight—terrible spectres with eyes of fire and long red tongues!"

Jonah leapt up and seized her hand. "Spectres, do you

say? I'm desperately afraid of spectres, but I'm only a poor traveller and I can't afford to pay for a night's lodging."

"My mistress does not keep an inn," said the slave woman with a superior air. "She wishes to do an act of charity."

"That's fine," said Jonah. "She must be a remarkable woman. Is she a Jewess?"

"No," said the slave. "She is a daughter of Assur."

"I might have known it," said Jonah. But to himself he added: These stupid Assyrians have no idea of money. They don't know how to charge. No sensible person would bring in a stranger from the street. But that's her business!

The woman whom he took to be a slave went before him, and he noticed that a refined scent of ointment hung about her. As they passed through the little door he could see in the dim light that there was a niche in the wall containing a terra cotta god with a fat stomach—the household deity—

presumably the god of fertility to judge by his fantastic appearance. But these heathens had curious ideas about the gods, Jonah thought.

He entered a paved courtyard with a plashing fountain. There were walls on every side and the court was no bigger than a threshing-floor. In one corner grew a palm, so tall that its top was lost in the darkness. The sky here seemed pitch-black, against the light of oil lamps hanging in the arcade leading to the house. The light shone upon the green herbs growing in the cracks between the paving-stones, which looked like the paper bouquets conjurers take out of top hats—with a nail at the bottom so that they can be planted upright on a floor-board—and in the same way these herbs stood stiff

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and motionless as tin flowers, their colour a dull green.

"Sit down on the step here," said the slave woman. "I will bring water for your feet."

How attentive, thought Jonah. How noble! He sat down. The woman departed, leaving him alone with the night and the chattering fountain. From where he sat he could see vultures sitting on the wall like ugly hens, sleeping with their heads under their wings. Now that the moon was gone a star came out above the palm-tree. It shone with a greenish light and quivered mysteriously. In the distance a bird sang a melancholy strain, a sob that ended in a screech. Probably it had been caught by a cat. That was an ugly omen, and Jonah didn't understand how he had been so bold as to sleep in the streets of this foreign city. His mind turned to piety and he thanked the unknown gods of the country, saying that hitherto the divine guidance had been but meagre. My god, he thought apologetically, is only a poor little parsimonious deity, who gives me nothing but cabbage-stalks, mouldy bread and a helping hand at the very last moment, but you gentlemen here in Assyria seem to be more liberal. You give generously. It looks as if I should be able to eat my fill for the first time in a great while, and that my shrunken belly shall bulge once more like a swelling sail. Thanks, O unknown Powers!

From a distant temple pyramid came the sound of horns, like the hooting of owls. He took it to be an acknowledgment of his thanks and said appreciatively: "These gods don't seem to waste much time!"

Then the slave came with a copper basin and washed his feet. There was something in the water which gave it a delicate scent of peppermint. He 112

her, as her deft hands worked at his homy feet, which were caked with dirt.

"You must have fairly wallowed in filth," she said in a motherly tone.

"One cannot choose one's path," replied Jonah philosophically.

She had nice smooth hair, but she was flat-nosed like Ayuta and doubtless low-born. When she had finished she splashed the dirty water over the paving-stones. "Wait a moment," she said; "I'll fetch the perfume."

This must be fairyland, thought Jonah. There's no knowing what will happen next. When the woman returned with a little jar and sprinkled him with scented water, he let her do it with an awkward feeling of gratitude. And when she anointed his hair with the practised hand of a barber, he accepted it with calm resignation. He was no longer surprised at anything.

"Is there no man in the house?" he asked.

"No, only my mistress and her three slaves, of whom I am one."

So I'm the cock of the walk! thought Jonah. He was the type of man who can get on best with women when no other men are present.

"Where may I lie down to sleep?" he asked.

"First you must be presented to my mistress."

"With pleasure," he said. "And may the gods bless the kind old soul!"

They went through a room containing barrels, sacks and great earthen jars. This was the storeroom of the house, filled with many good things. The slave raised the comer of a curtain and bade him approach. He ducked under and entered a square apartment as big as a good-sized

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dining-room. There was no furniture; most of the mud floor was covered with a great flowered carpet. Rugs hung on the walls, hiding the rough plaster, but the ceiling consisted of a stretched linen sheet which waved gently when the indoors warmth rose and met the cooler night air. In the middle of the room sat a woman, on a bright red silk cushion. Her dress was sky-blue, and her face was hidden by a white veil set with glass beads, if they were not diamonds.

"This is the mistress of the house," said the slave woman bowing deeply. Jonah did the same. He had imagined the lady as a nice old thing, and was greatly surprised to sec she was a beauty. She was lovely and fat, as

Orientals desire a woman to be. Her arms were bare; they were round and white and had just that firmness a plucked goose ought to have. She sat with her legs crossed; her feet showed from under her skirts, small and plump as an infant's. There were rings on her toes, and the nails were rose-pink—was it nature or art? Her hands too were fat and the fingers were puffy; but here the nails were long and pointed, giving an appearance of slenderness.

This must be a fairy, thought Jonah. He had never set eyes on such ravishing beauty in real life.

Before her stood a candlestick with three orange-coloured wax candles. Such wanton extravagance, considering the price of wax! In comparison with the pale glimmer of the oil lamps they filled the room with festal illumination. As the candlestick stood on the floor, its light fell upon her chin, which was visible below the edge of her veil. The skin was white and smooth, so she was evidently young.

Jonah made a profound obeisance and said: "Fair unknown

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lady! How is a poor man to thank you for condescending to look upon him in his unworthiness?"

The lady answered: "The poor man is a benefactor, the poet tells us. He permits the rich to accomplish those acts of charity which bring blessing."

"Wisdom sounds sweet from honeyed lips!" said Jonah. He wished to show that he was no ignorant clown.

Her voice was soft and purring. There was something about the language of this inland country which sounded like the purring of a cat—deep, hoarse guttural tones which were repellent when uttered by a camel-driver, but in a woman's mouth they were changed to a soft humming, reminding one of a contented pussycat. So ingratiating! Jonah thought; This must be a being from another world! He had often contrived to overhear the reciters of fairy-tales in Tyre, and their stories usually began thus: Had I a style of diamond and a tablet of gold I would record the description of a fairy who descended from the garden of light to make an earthly man happy—it was an experience of this sort that was falling to the lot of Jonah.

She inquired his name and rank. Whence did he come? Jonah replied that he was a scribe, but the chances of fortune had brought him to poverty, and now he had been sent to Nineveh on a dangerous and mysterious mission. This was not downright boasting or lying, but at the same time it

would not annoy him if she got the impression that he was a more important person than he appeared to be.

The slave woman brought cushions and spread them. He seated himself at the feet of the lady and the slave withdrew backwards with an officious air, like that of a travelling conjurer's assistant, who knows that something

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remarkable is about to take place.

"A friendly god has sent you to my house to-night!" said the lady.

She raised her powdered hand and drew back her veil. It was done slowly and with calculated effect, like the unveiling of a work of art. Jonah was positively agape. He bowed down and recited this verse of a love song from Tyre:

When the sun rose my heart danced with joy.
The earth was strewn with gold.
But when the moon came I thought I should go mad with delight.
The meadow was radiant with diamonds.

The lady bent her head and wished to show that she was not wanting in literary accomplishment. She replied with a verse of the hymn to the goddess of love:

The rose was created white,
But she blushed when told how beautiful she was.

Her face was powdered white with chalk, in accordance with the demands of propriety. It was as round as the full moon; the eyebrows were skilfully painted so as to describe an arch high up on the forehead. Her lips had the colour of dark red cherries and their outlines were so round that she appeared to be pouting. Her eyes were large, black and deep-set. Their whites were like sour milk. The eyes were prolonged with fine strokes after the Egyptian fashion.

"Are you a supernatural being?" asked Jonah with a sigh. She too sighed. This was good manners in an age

which veiled its outdoor brutality under much indoor sentimentality. "A strange fate has led you to my house," she said. "Have you never been told by other women that you are a handsome man?"

"It has happened!" said Jonah with self-approbation. He thought of Ayuta, the woman with cherry-coloured hands. A delicious dizziness overcame him at the thought of the inconceivable fortune that had introduced him to this marvel. Like a hidden warning a moth flitted in and sought the three candles in a delirious dance. Jonah caught it deftly in its flight, crushed it and crumbled its remains over the carpet with a motion of the fingers like a fly rubbing its legs together to clean them. And just at this moment there came from the adjoining room, where the slaves clattered with cooking utensils, a glorious odour of broiled onions. Jonah had eaten very little that day, and not only did his mouth water, but his belly rumbled audibly. He begged a thousand pardons. It was emotion, he said.

The lady took up a stringed instrument resembling a lyre. It had three strings, and as she drew her hand across them they were tuned so as to give a sound like that of the musical boxes children used to play with by the hour.

"I will sing to you," she said.

She plucked at the strings and intoned these words:

"The moon shone down upon the house; my servant saw you sitting in the shadow of the wall—a shadow wrapt in shadows—"

Pling-plang!

"I lay in first sleep upon my carpet. When coolness came with the night breeze, I awoke. The woman watching by my couch said: 'There sits a man outside against the wall.' I myself went out upon the roof and saw you.

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The moon shone upon you, and my heart was greatly agitated at the sight." *Pling-plang*.

"My bosom swelled. My breasts rose and sank like waves of marble that had come to life. I felt I loved for the first time."

*Pling-plingaling—plang.* 

She was silent, dropping her head as though awaiting her doom; but he had no idea how such a situation was to be dealt with. In Tyre he had seen a play performed by Cretan dancers, and there the general public had whistled through their fingers to express enthusiasm, but of course you couldn't do that in private. He bowed and said: "I have heard the language

of the gods through the mouth of a goddess. Whence have you such marvellous gifts?"

"It is love that does it," she said. And now she gave him a look so immodest that it made him blush. He thought this was altogether too wonderful to be true. It occurred to him that there was something dangerous in her eyes, as though an entirely different being—and by no means a pleasant one—were looking through the eye-holes of a mask. He was by nature bashful with women, and the mirror had convinced him long ago that he was no Adonis. He was therefore embarrassed at this magnificent woman casting her eyes upon him. When she laid her hand upon his arm he became apprehensive and drew back.

"Is it your poverty that makes you shy?" she asked. "To-night you are to be merry and banish all thoughts of the future. When you leave me I shall make you a gift at parting." She clapped her hands, and when the slave-girl entered she said: "I desire that you put fifty

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pieces of gold in a silken purse, and when our guest leaves us—and may it be late—you are to deliver it to him at the door."

"I hear and obey," said the girl with a bow.

It *must* be a dream, thought Jonah. But when he looked at his feet, washed clean as never before, he had to admit that it was real. And at the same time there was wafted the tempting smell of the onions, making him quite dizzy with hunger. He could only stammer: "I have come to the house of a princess, and I pray the gods to make me worthy of your magnanimity."

The lady smiled and said: "We will now drink a cup of welcome."

"Is it a good thing to drink on an empty stomach?" said Jonah cautiously.

"The wine will pour fire into your veins!" she said.

But Jonah didn't like wine. He recalled what his father had always said: "Wine is a tempter and there lurks a serpent at the bottom of the cup!" The lady clapped her hands again, in another rhythm this time, and two negro girls appeared, so ugly that they looked like dressed-up monkeys; they prostrated themselves before her and she gave them an order in a language he did not understand.

When they had gone she said: "I will dance for you while they prepare the drink."

Jonah was more interested in food than in dancing, but he could not be uncivil. He said it was a great honour.

She rose and put off her upper garment, so that she was naked to the belt—well, actually a little below it. Jonah blinked his eyes, as though afraid to look. Then she stood forward on the carpet in front of him, gathered

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up her skirts and began to perform the immemorial stomach dance of Asia. Her skin quivered, as though there was an earthquake inside her. It shook, it waved, the upper part of her body swayed gently, and at the same time she moved her palms up and down along her sides as though magnetising herself.

Had it not been for the smell of onions Jonah might perhaps have been a prey to evil desires, but he could only think of food. He had been brought up to see something shameful in this naked immodest dance, and it repelled him. Nor did it look very nice when the stout lady began to perspire. Fortunately the girls arrived with the drink and offered a cup to each. Jonah sniffed at the contents, which were bitter and strong.

"This," said the lady, "is a miraculous drink recommended by the physicians. It will strengthen you, so that you will strip off your weariness as an athlete strips off his cloak before the race."

The lady gave him an ardent look and Jonah plucked up courage, tilted his head and gulped down the drink. It tasted like bitter medicine. He shuddered, but as it passed down his throat a pleasant warmth trickled through him.

The lady had also swallowed her drink. She held out the cup bottom upwards to show him she had emptied it. He nodded and did the same, but it seemed to him that the lady was suddenly transported far into the background—she had two heads, and they swung like pendulums, each going its own way. He blinked his eyes—tried to pull himself together—in vain—felt the top of his head turn cold as ice and leave him, like taking off a skull-cap—it came down again—rose—came down once more. His stomach was aflame, like that of a fire-eater

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who has swallowed the burning tow by mistake.

He clutched at his throat and gurgled: "I'm poisoned—murder!" He tried to get up—groped in the empty air for something to lay hold of, and fell

with a thud on the floor....

When he came to himself he was sitting in the street against the wall of the house, and the sun, which had risen, shone in his eyes. He had a thundering headache. At first he thought it was all a confused dream, but again it was his feet that brought him to his senses. The bare toes, protruding from the dust of the road, were still clean. He remembered having his feet washed. So it must have been real.

His next thought was—the money! He plunged his hand into his bosom. The purse was gone—the two hundred pieces of silver were stolen. He jumped up and searched on the ground. Of course they were not there. He saw the door with the improper little pot-bellied god and hammered at it with his fists—a regular tom-tom solo. He kicked at the door, shouting abuses—for he was plucky enough where money was concerned.

From the court within he heard footsteps and a voice saying: "There, there! Who's knocking so early?" A little peep-hole in the door was opened and an ancient female looked out and asked what he wanted.

"I was robbed in here last night," said Jonah furiously.

"Who are you?" asked the woman. "I don't know you."

"I was your mistress's guest—"

"I have no mistress," said the woman. "I serve the venerable physician Musam. He is the owner of the house."

"It's a lie!" said Jonah. "A black lie! It was no venerable

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physician that danced for me last night."

"Poor man," said the woman. "You've got the fever. You're raving. Go down to the river and take a bath!"

She shut the hatch and left him standing there, but he didn't give it up. He went on knocking and hammering.

From a roof on the other side of the street an old man called to him, wanting to know the meaning of this noise. He was told the story of the big sum of money of which Jonah had been robbed. The man shook his head, saying: "No sensible man visits a brothel with all that money on him."

"I thought she was a respectable benefactress," said Jonah.

"Couldn't you see the sign by the door—the harlots' household god?"

Jonah stared at the little grinning god and felt a fool. He explained that he was a stranger here; how was he to know that this image had any meaning? But there must be justice here as in other places. He would go to the district judge and ask him to get back the money.

The old man shook his head and answered: "Our judge happens to be this woman's best customer. You'll never get anything out of him. He's more likely to ask how a person of your miserable appearance could have come by two hundred pieces of silver honestly."

Jonah lost all heart and exclaimed: "Then where in the world am I to go?"

The old woman, who had stood behind the door and heard it all, opened the little hatch again and said with a hideous smile: "Jump into the river—duck your head under, and if that doesn't make it clearer, stay there. Ha-ha-ha!"

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She laughed like a malignant witch and slammed the hatch.

II

AS THE woman's laughter died away behind the closed door Jonah was left there, speechless with grief and shame. He turned to the stranger who was still standing on his roof and seemed tickled to death: "Which is the way to the river?" asked Jonah. The man pointed: "That way!" And Jonah thanked him.

He went off with bent head and slouching feet, the perfect picture of a man who has thrown up the game. There are some kinds of adversity that can be borne—especially if one is trained to bear adversity—one can hang between a pair of crutches and still show a smile—but the smile won't come when the only chance of a lifetime has been struck out of one's hand. One may find a purse of two hundred pieces of silver lying in the roadway so to speak, but if one loses it, one never finds another.

I'm done! said Jonah to himself. That hag was right. There's nothing for it but to jump into the river. The men who threw me overboard from the great ship were really trying to do me a charity. But I'm evidently meant to be drowned twice over. So let it be!

He walked through a quarter which was waking up. He heard the crowing of cocks and the cooing of doves and saw vultures take off from the roofs and glide the way he was going—down towards the river. Ah, you won't go short of food to-day, he thought. Wait a bit, I'm coming as fast as

I can! On and on he wandered through this strange and monstrous village, where one could hear the bleating of lambs and the mooing of

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cows mingling with human voices which resumed the bickerings interrupted by the night. He heard the morning hymn from the temples and the long-drawn cry of the water-carriers: "Water below!" One of them asked if he didn't want some to drink, and he answered with bitter irony that he would soon have more of it than he cared for. On he wandered through the dust, and now that people were really awake the city exhaled its usual acrid smell from the camel's dung burning on the hearths of this treeless land and sending spirals of smoke up into the still air.

Thus began the day in Nineveh, and thus it would begin to-morrow, when his body would lie rocking to and fro in the reeds of the river bank, like an old seaweed mattress that had been brought down by the stream. Thus ends the story of Jonah the son of Amittai, he thought—unless it gets caught in a fisherman's net and the man who hauls me up and sees my blue-black face curses me and shoves me back into the mud with a boathook. But let him do it. By that time I shall be away from it all.

No time of day is so depressing to a doomed man as this morning hour, when everybody else is getting out of bed with great plans, fresh hopes and fresh aims. For every day is a new card one takes from the pack and adds to those one holds already—perhaps the very card that will take the big trick. No one has ever heard of a man hanging himself the first thing in the morning; that is, if he has slept well.

Jonah felt his eyes grow moist, so greatly did he pity himself. The people he met were hale and hearty; they greeted him with cheerful cries: "Nebo protect you! Assur give you luck!"—"Thanks!" muttered Jonah. This morning greeting was so new to him that he took it literally,

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though of course it was nothing but a parrot-cry they croaked in passing. He asked for the river, and they still pointed west. "Is it far?" he asked. "An hour or so," they said.

As Jonah walked along he noticed the cold shudder—the waves of heat and cold—that passed through him when the Lord was drawing near. There was a simmering within him, like the purring of the radio when it is switched on. But he didn't wish to listen. He didn't understand joking in

money matters, and if the Lord allowed him to be robbed of two hundred pieces of silver, he was a bad Lord. Jonah was offended and adopted an acrimonious attitude. He was stubborn. He resisted. But the Lord was too strong for him, and now the Voice came through with imperative authority, mounting the pulpit of conscience.

"Well, Jonah!" it said. "What has become of your uppishness of yesterday, when you had money in your purse? Are you on your way to give thanks to the new gods to whom you have submitted yourself? Has Marduk been gracious to you? Is it Nimrod that has brought you prosperity? Or is it the goddess with the nine breasts who has taken you to her bosom? Did they help you last night?"

Jonah walked with long strides, looking down at the ground. He made no answer. He thought it unworthy of the Lord to speak thus to a man who was on his way to the river.

"Has it dawned on you," said the Voice, "that I am more powerful than these wooden gods? You cannot fly far enough to escape me. I led you to the house of the harlot and set you up against the wall. I brought the slave woman out on to the roof at the moment when you were

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counting your money. When the harlot awoke in the night the slave said to her: 'There sits a man by the wall counting money.' And the harlot said, as I had provided: 'Fetch him in and let us plunder him.' For you must know, my son Jonah, that even in Nineveh it holds good that a fool and his money are soon parted."

Jonah walked faster and faster. He evidently thought he could run away from himself. He was tired of this Voice, which always demanded something and gave so little in return. It was so easy for the Lord to say: Now let this be a lesson to you, and then I'll give you another two hundred pieces of silver! But Jonah knew he wouldn't do that. It seemed to be beneath his dignity to do miracles with ready money.

The Voice spoke to him again: "I have decided that in eight days you are to stand forth in the face of Nineveh and say the things with which I inspire you. Then all will be made easy for you, so that the incredible will happen and the great city will listen and obey. You think now that you are going to the river to drown yourself, but you will see, it will turn out very differently."

"Not this time!" said Jonah. "I too have a will, though I be but a speck of dust face to face with eternity. I have cursed my life and the day I was born. And look, I spit upon the earth you have created—pt—I will not tread it one day longer. I am going into the great nothingness—I wipe myself out, as a scribe wipes out a stroke on his tablet. In an hour I shall be no more."

Ш

HE WENT on through the labyrinth of streets until they opened out and he found himself in a market-place as big

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as a parade-ground or a common. Contrasted with Tyre there was abundance of room in Nineveh. Above this wide surface there hung a pale yellow cloud of the dust that was raised by the men and beasts tramping about. They had spent the night here in order to secure a good position in the market, and now they were stretching their legs and taking a little exercise. The officials of the quarter came up with a dignified air and long staves in their hands to receive the market dues as well as the baksheesh which had to be given if one didn't wish to be assigned a place in the remotest parts of the square. They recorded on tablets the quantity of goods each man had brought. These Assyrians were fanatically methodical; every possible form of activity was subject to regulation.

The life here interested Jonah so intensely that for the moment he forgot his melancholy business at the river. For he was filled with the trading spirit. He went from group to group, looking at the people and their goods. There were dusky creatures with the simple faces of animals, who had come from a far distance and had before them lions' skins, ostrich feathers and gazelles' horns, which they had procured by incredible efforts and at the risk of their lives. When asked the prices they looked up with frightened eyes, knowing that whatever they might ask they were bound to be cheated by the hard-headed townsfolk.

He saw peasants, clad in nothing but a scanty loin-cloth. They sat among mountains of dates which were black with flies. When they fanned with a dry palm-branch the flies rose like a cloud and buzzed a yard above the ground as long as the fanning was kept up, but when the men got tired the flies instantly settled and intoxicated themselves on the sweet and sticky fruit. There were also townsfolk

selling pots, mostly old men with wrinkled faces and toothless loquacity.

The big men of the market were those who sold camels. This business occasioned a good deal of noise and great clouds of dust, as the camels were trotted past and shrieked hysterically at not being allowed to lie in peace. The men were tall and powerful. They wore arm-rings, used forcible language and bore a suspicious resemblance to desert robbers; but they dealt loftily in large sums. The chinking of the purses at their belts inspired respect, and the small fry looked up to them with awe.

Jonah did not like these loud-voiced people, he preferred the vicinity of those who dealt in melons and pots of honey. The wasps swarmed about him like malicious aeroplanes. Bargaining proceeded in eastern fashion with many words, which rose to insults and curses when the customer threatened to go. The bystanders were called to witness: on their conscience, weren't the goods fine? But at last, on the conclusion of the bargain, there were mutual congratulations and blessings.

Jonah spent a long time among these people, inquiring prices, though he had no intention of buying. Most of all he was attracted by the simple-looking men with the lions' skins. If one could afford to buy, he thought, there was good business to be done here. For profits can always be made when blockheads come to market.

In a corner of the square a cook had established himself with his pots. As Jonah went by and caught the fine odour of onions, oil, cabbage, bay-leaves and fat boiled mutton his mouth began to water and he found he was hungry. He still had a few silver coins sewed up in the hem of his cloak; why let the fishes have them? He greeted the man politely, and the man returned his greeting. So Jonah

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seated himself on the ground beside the largest cauldron and while the man attended to his cooking they fell to talking.

It appeared that this cook was also a Jew—curiously enough, as the dressing of victuals was not a Jewish specialty. It was more a Babylonian art. But this man had learnt it in the eating-houses of Babylon, just as Jonah had thought of doing. Then they began to bargain for a meal. For it was not a simple affair of the customer ordering what he wanted: there was much haggling to be gone through. Jonah got up several times and threatened to

leave, and they were unpleasant enough to use such words as son of a dog and Babylonian cowherd, but the moment they were agreed on the payment all unfriendliness was forgotten, and as the cook had also found an appetite they sat in the dust each with his bowl, gratefully gulping the soup and snatching with long brown fingers at the floating bits of meat and the treacherous onions which eluded them with their smoothness.

The other Jew told Jonah that his name was Joseph. His family came from Jerusalem and had been carried away in one of the forced migrations that were an invariable accompaniment of war. He was short and dirty, and he spoke as if he had a cold. One moment he was humble, the next he was crowing vaingloriously as if he could buy up half Babylon if he liked.

He had begun by selling sandal laces, which his woman made at home from horsehair on a little loom. But then the woman died—it was the west wind that killed her, he said—and who was to make the laces? Well, of course he might have done it himself, but it didn't suit him to do women's work. He preferred to be a cook. It was easier to stand here and let customers come to one than

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to run all over Nineveh and earn a wretched mite or get paid in rotten fish or mouldy barley-bread which people wouldn't eat themselves.

Jonah could see that the other was a stupid fellow, and Jonah knew that if you did find a stupid Jew his stupidity was beyond all bounds. But then it didn't require much brains to stand selling mutton. At regular intervals Joseph set up his cry: "Fine dinners! Cheap dinners!" and he cried it in his harsh, grating voice. For compared with the Assyrian the Jews' language was as rasping as broad Scotch. In between he chattered away: "This is a horrible town! Nothing but dust and powdered camel-dung. The people are a lot of miserly swindlers. Every other coin you get is bad.—Fine dinners! Cheap dinners!—And then there's far too many of them. They're falling over one another. And the roads are crawling with lousy peasants coming to Nineveh to make their fortunes. They think the place is paved with gold. But the truth is, half the people live by begging off the other half.—Fine dinners! Cheap dinners!—You can see, they all go past. The beggars can't afford to fill their bellies."

Now he was expecting Jonah to reciprocate by telling *his* story; and of course Jonah, who in his loneliness and misery would have found consolation in talking to a dung-beetle, could not help blurting it all out. It

was just as well the other should know that Jonah was the son of a scribe and himself a scribe, but had grown weary of the hard road of officialdom and was going to try his luck in business, which was the only real way of making money, if one wasn't strong enough to go in for direct robbery. But then a terrible thing had happened: the Lord had spoken to him and sent him to this city.

The stupid Joseph stared at him, paralysed by the

thought that a holy man was sitting here by his side. "Master," he said; "I have a boil on one of my legs. Will you not touch it, and it will disappear? It gives me a lot of trouble."

Jonah shook his head and explained that at the moment there was no miraculous power in him, as he had fallen out with the Lord. And he related his adventure of the night before, how he had lost two hundred pieces of silver.

The other clapped his hands together and said, using an Assyrian phrase: "I hear and marvel! What are you going to do now?"

"Jump into the river," said Jonah.

Joseph thought for a moment and then said: "That's sensible. I'd do the same if I had the anger of the Lord hanging over me and had lost a fortune. But you mustn't wade out; that's so slow. You must go down to the Damascus bridge and jump off there. That's what other people do—Fine dinners! Cheap dinners!" he cried, for business had to be attended to in spite of his excitement.

Jonah dragged himself on the last part of his way towards the river. It seemed to him he knew Nineveh inside and out, there were the same endless streets of yellow walls without windows and with tiny doors, as though the important thing was to keep people out. Here and there the top of a palm rose above a flat roof, and it was always dust} and withered like a set borrowed from the battered scenery of a theatre. The city irritated him with its combination of tediousness and greatness. It was merely immense, all repetition. Was that anything remarkable? But even if it was remarkable, it didn't matter to him, for when a man has made up his mind to die, everything else is of small account.

And yet he was wondering to himself if something

altogether out of the common would not happen. It was so hard to believe that his last moment had really come. Would not the Lord see his mistake after all and give him back his money? And when things were on a sensible footing once more, they might resume negotiations. It was so regrettable to break off entirely. He went so far as to address himself directly to the invisible, saying: "Now perhaps you understand your responsibility? This isn't play-acting! I'm going to drown myself properly. And then what will you do? Who is to bring your message?"

He laid his ear to his soul and listened. It was still as a rock-hewn grave. No soft murmuring of the spirit, no approaching footsteps, no slamming of the doors of eternity. Obviously the Lord was in a sour temper, or else he was putting on a lofty bearing. Jonah realised this with bitterness. "Well, well," he said to himself. "Perhaps one cannot live and be happy without God, but one can certainly die. That requires no help."

And suddenly the river was before him, gleaming and wide. It sparkled like molten metal, for the sunshine was radiated from all the wavelets formed by the current. The river was busy to-day. There was much water in its bed, and like Jonah it was bubbling over with eagerness to complete its great journey to the unfathomable ocean. "Take me with you!" said Jonah. "I too long for the great ocean of eternity."

He had imagined the river as running through beds of rushes, where one could comfortably wade out in the tepid water till it was deep enough to duck one's head. Who knows, perhaps he even had an idea that one might change one's mind and walk back again. But it was not like that. The river had dug out its bed between high gravel banks, and these were perfectly bare. There was a gay scene of

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bathers—men, women and children all mixed together, just what you would expect in this abandoned city. They shouted with joy and gambolled like a school of dolphins.

In one place piles were being driven for a landing pier. The labourers were toiling with great tree-trunks, which showed how deep it must be outside. This was the place Jonah chose for his great jump. He walked slowly along the pier, and funnily enough he was nervous because there was no handrail. Man is always the same, to the very last moment of his life. When he reached the end he sat for a moment on a plank looking down into the river, which flowed past at such a rate that it foamed about the

piles. It made him giddy; he clung to a pile, shut his eyes and uttered man's last prayer: "God be merciful to me, poor sinner!" And he thought these were some of the truest words he had spoken for a long time.

Then he let himself slide. He did not jump, that would have been against his nature. He slid in the same silly way as a naughty child who won't sit up properly on a chair, but slips off the seat stiffly. No sooner did he feel that he had cast off life's moorings than he was seized with a terrible fear of death. The space between the pier and the surface of the water, through which his body fell in the fraction of a second, seemed endless. Time had stopped; to Jonah it felt as if he was being slowly lowered into the water. He had time to live through most of his life. The images flashed past like a cinema film driven by an operator who had gone suddenly mad. But all the same Jonah saw each separate picture, and there was but one thought in his head: It's too late to turn back now!

His body struck the water with a splash, and he writhed and shuddered, for this green water from the snows was icy cold. Every cell of his body contracted in a cramp. It

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felt as if a breastplate of ice had been buckled on him, so that he couldn't draw breath. Now he was sinking. The current forced him down sideways till he reached the bottom—but not with his feet; he was rolled over like a log in a rapid and severely bumped whenever he scraped the actual bottom; but then he was carried up again, up towards the light, which he saw as through a bell of thick glass; and he lost consciousness with the thought: God be praised. This is death!

He did not know how much time had elapsed, and he was greatly bewildered when he opened his eyes again and looked straight up into the sparkling pale-blue sky. He was lying in the bottom of a boat, very uncomfortably on a heap of dead fish with round pink bellies. He was entirely naked and felt as if he lay on a bed of billiard-balls. The fish were slimy, to make matters worse, so that he slid backwards and forwards at the slightest rocking of the boat. An old man who sat on the after thwart steering with an oar while holding the sheet of the sail, bent forward and looked at him.

Jonah was not a very agreeable sight. He tried to sit up, but the effort brought about a revolution in his inside, and he gulped up bucketfuls of river-water over the fish. At last he got up far enough to look over the gunwale, and then he saw he was in the neighbourhood of the Damascus bridge, a long way from the place where he jumped in. But he was alive, and so weak and faint that he hadn't the pluck to jump in again.

"Well," said the old man; "how do you feel?"

Jonah replied bitterly that he felt very bad. Why had he been rescued? He was already in the arms of death, and it was not right to recall a man to his sorrows when at last he had escaped from them.

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At this the old man laughed and said: "You won't have far to go for death. When we come ashore I have only to hand you over to the guard and they'll have you drowned in boiling oil. That's the punishment for defiling the sacred river by taking your life in it." But Jonah could see that the old man didn't mean it seriously. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

The fisherman put Jonah ashore, saying: "Be off with you now, you scarecrow! I'll pray the gods to forgive me for saving your miserable life."

And Jonah wrapped his wet cloak about him and thanked his rescuer. "I think," he said, "that my God has some design in letting me live. He will surely reward you."

To which the fisherman replied with a sly smile: "It doesn't look as if your god thought much of you!"

## IV

JONAH WALKED up and down the river bank in the broiling sun, which dried his steaming cloak. He went up into the city and bought another meal, and when his stomach was full a sleepy sense of well-being came over him, making him sit down in the shade of a wall and close his eyes. Then he felt that curious elevation of the soul which announced the approach of the Lord, and he was glad of it, for he felt so terribly lonesome in the foreign city that he was happy to be addressed by any voice, even if it came from within himself.

"Well, my son Jonah!" said the Lord. "What has your wilfulness done for you? Know you not that I have said to the refractory: 'Though thou shouldst make thy nest as high as the eagle, I will bring thee down from thence?"

Jonah knew it, but made no answer. He thought himself

justified in feeling a trifle hurt, since he was not allowed either to live or die in peace.

But the Voice said to him: "Rest now and recover your senses after your crazy behaviour. Remember that in eight days the hour will arrive when you are to speak to Nineveh." Then the Lord went into his eternity and closed the door behind him, and Jonah fell asleep with his head hanging on his chest and did not wake till some hours later, when a man kicked him, not unkindly, but simply out of curiosity. He wanted to see if he was dead.

Jonah knew that a poor Jew must accustom himself to being kicked without a murmur. He rose, heavy with sleep, and staggered on. Now he was altogether out of humour. He loafed about, as people do who have nothing to live for except killing time. He fell into a reverie over the carcass of a dead dog, or he loitered before an ale-house looking into its cool darkness, from whence came an acrid scent of beer. But then a big man came out and asked him if he was looking for anyone; if not he'd better clear out sharp. Jonah slouched on wearily. He seated himself beside a well in company with a garrulous old beggar, who told him what a cursed place Nineveh was for people who were old and poor. Here they didn't respect anyone who wasn't young enough to be ruthless. They didn't give anything away, it was every man for himself. It was quite different in Babylon, where they weren't so hard-fisted. Ah, they were fine folks in Babylon! Light-hearted and fond of a joke. Here in Nineveh you saw nothing but sour faces. And why? Because the folk were insatiable. They all went about thinking they'd been done out of something if they couldn't drink wine out of golden cups from morning to night. But it must be something to do with

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the climate. The old beggar had tramped all over the country and his experience was that the farther north you came, the harder hearted the people were. "If you come up among the mountains they set the dogs on you, and if you have a cloak that isn't all rags, they'll kill you, as likely as not, to get it."

Jonah walked on through the great city, which swarmed with an apparently purposeless life. People hurried along thinking of their own little troubles, just like the people in the streets of Tyre or Rome or Paris. They must have passed a thousand times the monument to Tiglath-Pileser, which Jonah was now looking at. To them it meant nothing at all but a big stone

with a graven image. They didn't even know the conqueror king. Once they had come here holding their mother's hand and had seen the monument for the first time, and asked "Mummy, why does that man look so cross?" and their mother had said: "He ain't cross, darling; that's a king or something. What was it they called him?" She didn't know. She asked a water-carrier and he answered: "There ain't nobody can tell you that, missis. It's somebody that lived a long time ago."

Now a funeral was coming along the street. The donkey-drivers and women with baskets on their heads halted, turned to face the procession and gave the sign of mourning—a little tug at the hem of their garment. That was supposed to mean that they rent their clothes, as was done at a death in the family. They did it quite mechanically, without thinking anything about it. One had enough with one's own troubles. Jonah did as he saw the others doing. After the corpse came litters with ladies and gentlemen sitting behind curtains and thinking many strange thoughts as they were rocked along. Nineveh

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meant nothing to them but an abominable nuisance of yellow dust penetrating everywhere. And then of course the flies.

Jonah felt completely superfluous, absolutely without connection with the life around him, and that made him bitter. Human beings are sociable creatures—especially in the East—and they must have someone to talk to. And suddenly there came a horseman riding by who gave him a cut over the backbone with his whip—partly because he was a Jew and a wretched one, and partly because it's fun when one is perched on a horse to have a smack at a creature crawling in the dust; but he didn't really do it from malice, unless one can call it malicious of little angel-faced children to pull the wings off flies.

This cut of the whip stung Jonah severely. The lash curled round his skinny body and it felt like a red-hot metal wire against his bare skin. He doubled up with the pain and stood panting for breath. But at the same time it roused him to action, for there are limits to what a human being can put up with in the way of torture and insult. The horseman was already far away, but Jonah's wrath was in such a ferment that it had to find vent, and as he was a Hebrew its natural vent was a flood of words.

He happened to be in one of the smaller market-places, of which there were hundreds in Nineveh. This one was chiefly for the sale of vegetables.

In the middle of the square a stone was set up on a plinth with an inscription giving the rules for the conduct of the market—not very useful, one would think, since not one of the men and women who sat on the ground with their baskets had yet been able to read a word of the writing.

Jonah leapt up on the stone, raised his hands to heaven and cried: "Woe! Woe! I curse this city! Woe

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to all of you who work iniquity and oppress the poor and the stranger!" His voice quivered, showing that he was possessed with the great wrath that comes upon those who suffer patiently like the ass used to beating, till one day quite unexpectedly they turn restive and kick and bite and scream.

The people sitting round about looked up, and many of them came nearer. These possessed ones, so common in Semitic countries, were an unfailing entertainment in the life of the streets, like the speakers who get up on a soap-box in Hyde Park to revolutionise society. The populace loved to hear their ungovernable shrieks and their flaming accusations. They could see that Jonah had reached red-hot pitch. The little man's eyes flashed, his lips trembled, his arms gesticulated wildly.

"I curse this city, where you rob the wayfarer and ill-treat the man of peace," he cried. "Do you not know that there is a limit to divine tolerance? I can tell you that God has taken counsel and determined that punishment is to fall upon you. God is God, and I am his prophet!"

A man in the crowd called out: "Do a miracle! Come on, do a miracle!" But Jonah was not to be interrupted. He cried: "You scoundrels! You vagabonds! You lousy camel-thieves! You hypocritical jades! I curse you. I pray that the Lord, who is mightier than your idols, may raze this city to the ground, that not a blade of grass shall grow upon it to give food for a locust.

"What have I not seen with my own eyes?" he cried. "Have I not seen the poor scourged with whips? Have I not seen the rich carried about in idleness by their slaves—slaves, my friends, who are human beings like you and me. Have I not seen the captain of the King's host trample the people under his feet? And then the priests—your

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priests, who serve the idols that the Lord will throw down—how shall I find words for the abominations they commit—"

Until now the people in the market-place had listened in silent wonder, but now a man seized a water melon and flung it at Jonah's head with great accuracy, so that it burst in his face and raised a wave of laughter.

Now that a start had been made everyone joined in. Jonah received a selection of the market products and was soon buried in a heap of cabbage-stalks, broken eggs and bits of melon. Then the street-boys fell upon him like a pack of hounds. They thrashed him soundly while the grown-ups looked on. These young murderers-to-be tried if they couldn't knock the life out of him. They fetched clubs and went for him as if he were a rat. Jonah lay on his face and received their blows. He was unconscious, perhaps already dead. And as they belaboured him they shouted gleefully: "Go for him—kill the Jew—smash the Jew!"

At this point a litter was crossing the market-place, and when the man who sat in it heard these shouts he drew the curtain aside and ordered his bearers to stop. They sat down the litter, and he asked the bystanders what was the matter. What had the Jew done? A woman sitting by a heap of dates answered that it was a crazy prophet and the innocent children were getting some fun out of him.

"Go and help him," said the man to his slaves. They went up to the group, took the boys by the scruff of the neck and flung them this way and that as if they had been puppies. The market folk growled, but their respect for a man in a litter was so immense that they dared not oppose him in earnest.

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V

THE MAN who had rescued Jonah was himself a Jew. He was anything but a soft-hearted man, but as he crossed the square and heard Jonah cry out it reminded him of the little mountain town where he was born and of the great event it had been when a wandering prophet visited the place. It was as exciting as a travelling circus. Both joy and horror were to be had in listening to these wild men in camel's hair mantles with tangled hair and beard caked and matted with neglect. Their eyes were bloodshot and their voices rough, as though the spiteful words they hurled out had worn their vocal cords. They fumed against the sins and vices of the wealthy, things that were utterly unknown in the well-behaved little town. "Woe to the women of Sidon!" they shrieked. "Woe to those who dye their hair and

paint their lips with crimson!" The women of the little town looked at one another and thought: So it's the fashion now to dye your hair and lips! But of course our stupid husbands will never let us do that! And the prophet continued to roar: "Woe to the traders of Tyre, who use false weights and have a double bottom to their measures!" Then the men thought: So you can do that, can you? Perhaps one ought to try making a measure like that. Thus the effect of the prophets' preaching was sometimes very different from what they intended.

But it was thrilling to watch their crazy behaviour, how they could turn the whites of their eyes and thump themselves on the chest with their huge fists, making a hollow noise as if they were beating a big drum. Sometimes they were so possessed that they tore off their clothes and

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danced about stark naked, as they prophesied the downfall of kings and kingdoms and foretold that Babylon would be destroyed by Easter. On these occasions the women fled in alarm, for it was a terrible sin to see a man naked.

The man in the litter looked at the wretched little specimen of a prophet who was lying across his knees like a child that is going to be flogged. He smiled as he compared him with the Moses-like forms he had seen in his young days. They were powerful fellows like himself—broad-shouldered men with flowing grey beards. Jonah was lean and small, so skinny, so insignificant, so flat-chested, so short in the leg. The man said to himself: I'll swear this is a town Jew. I shouldn't be surprised if he's a priest or a scribe.

Jonah began to whimper, like a child crying in its sleep. The strong man turned him over and looked kindly at his pale, bruised face. He felt for this man of pain and brushed the hair from his forehead, till Jonah opened his eyes and whispered: "Am I in Abraham's bosom?"

"No!" said the other. "But you weren't far off it."

Jonah tried to raise his head so that he could see his rescuer, but he could not, for his body pained him so that he uttered a suppressed cry of complaint. "Where am I?" he asked.

"In the hands of a fellow-countryman," replied the other. "I am Nahum." But Jonah knew nobody of that name. He said: "They've broken my back. I shall never be well again!"

"Take it calmly," said Nahum. "I've seen men worse handled than you, and they got over it."

Then Jonah swooned again. It had been a hard day for the little man. When they took him out of the litter

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and dragged him into Nahum's house he hung between the slaves like a dead-drunk man or a rag doll. Then the slave women came forward and were given orders to wash him and lay him in a chamber apart, where he could be left in peace.

Nahum went into the interior of the house to his wife and daughter and told them: "I've fished up a silly little prophet in the vegetable market. They had just about killed him for telling them what rascals they were." And Nahum laughed, showing his big white teeth, and stroked his big black beard and seated himself with crossed legs and took off his turban and handed it to a slave-girl.

He was married to a fat little Jewess whose name was Leah. She only laughed; it didn't occur to her to make any remark about her husband's bringing in a half-dead prophet. It was the rule of the house that what Pa does is always right. The young daughter Sarah was also of a gentle disposition. She was touched at the fate of the poor man. She had the great dark eyes of her people, and they were moist with sympathy. She also had their big nose, but she was still so delicate and charming that she resembled a young swift-footed gazelle—so alert, her whole being a note of interrogation, and so enraptured at the wonderful thought of having a prophet in the house.

"When the fellow comes to himself I'll put him through his paces," said Nahum. "A man needn't be a real prophet just because he gets up and shouts bad language. But at any rate he's a countryman in distress."

Meanwhile Jonah lay in a fever tossing on his couch, which was a finer one than he was used to, being a wool-sack delicately scented with herbs. He muttered in delirium, talking now to the Lord, now to the camel behind which he had tramped to Nineveh, now to the fisherman

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who had hauled him out of the river. Nahum entered with an old man skilled in the art of healing, and they looked at Jonah and turned him over and felt him, at which he uttered heartrending shrieks. Then they let him lie and shook their heads. The wise man said: "He has received an internal injury. He won't live through the night."

The night came and it was still and hot, as the nights are at this season. The cicadas chirped, the bats whined, the men groaned with the heat and smacked in their sleep at the mosquitos that stung their fat necks. For the sleep of Nineveh was as uneasy as a nightmare when the baleful desert wind was blowing.

When morning came the people awoke grey in the face and ill-tempered for want of sleep; but while all the rest had been tossing on their beds of rushes or their wool cushions or feather mattresses, Jonah had slept like a child. The fever had left him. He woke in the morning feeling well and wondered where he was. He jumped up and went round the room, felt his limbs and found they were whole, even the soreness was gone. That might indeed be called a miracle!

"Yes, God is mighty!" he said. "But his ways are unfathomable. How much better it would have been to spare me this pain. Other great lords do all they can to smooth the path of their envoys, but it looks as if the Lord has the curious idea that those who represent him must needs be poor, ragged and a prey to misfortune."

Then Nahum came in, with his dignified air. He was astonished, almost thunderstruck. "Are you alive, man?" he said.

"Yes," said Jonah. "Yesterday I was twice in the arms of death, to-day I'm as sound as a roach!"

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"You must be a real prophet," said Nahum; "since the Lord performs miracles for your sake. He must want you for some great purpose."

"Ah," sighed Jonah; "that's just the sad thing about it."

They sat down on the woolsack and Jonah told the story of his life. He could rival the storytellers of the bazaars, with all the details he had invented in the time when he wandered through the villages earning his bread by his tales. Nahum was a plain man who had never told stories of this kind, though his adventures were no less remarkable than Jonah's. He listened agape; every moment he clapped his hands together and exclaimed: "Truly this ought to be written with a diamond style on tablets of gold!"

"Ah," said Jonah, "that's nothing to what's coming." He told of the storm at sea and the great fish.

At this Nahum nodded. He himself had been to sea and thought he had seen the fish: "I have wandered through deserts and climbed trackless mountains and fought on horseback and on foot," he said, "but this is the wonder of wonders! Tell me more, my dear Jonah. I am all ears."

Jonah went on with his story, and whenever he told how the Lord had spoken to him Nahum bowed his head reverently. "Tell me," he interrupted, "don't you throw yourself on your face when the Lord speaks to you?"

"No," replied Jonah; "why should I? He speaks from within." And Jonah pointed to his chest.

"You're a plucky man in your own way," said Nahum. "I should tremble like a child if the Lord spoke to me."

"At times I'm inclined to think it's only something whispering within me, as in a fever," said Jonah. "Why did the Lord say I was to preach to Nineveh, when in spite

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of that he deserted me at the decisive moment?"

"I believe I know why," said Nahum. "Don't be angry if I tell you an unpleasant truth. You told me the Lord had said you were to speak to Nineveh in eight days' time. He didn't say yesterday, did he? So why didn't you wait? I have people under me, and I send them to far-off lands and give them orders as to what they're to do and when they're to do it. And I expect them to follow my orders precisely. Don't you think it may be the same with the Lord? He is angry with you for not waiting till the moment he had chosen."

Jonah pondered over this, and said: "Can it be possible? I did it with a good intention."

"H'm, are you quite sure about *that*?" said Nahum. "You spoke because you were sour about losing your money and getting slashed over the back with a whip. It was your own anger you gave vent to, not the Lord's."

"Well, well," said Jonah; "have you ever tried losing two hundred pieces of silver?"

"I've lost many times more," replied Nahum with a smile. "You can't help that in business."

"Talking about business," said Jonah; "tell me, my dear rescuer, what is vour line?"

At this Nahum showed embarrassment and said he did many kinds of business.

"What kinds?" asked Jonah. He was a Jew, therefore curious and not always tactful. He wouldn't understand that the other didn't wish to pursue the subject.

Nahum said: "We will talk about something else, little prophet. There are many trades under the sun, especially in a great country like this. But come, I will show you my house, and you must know that you are a welcome guest, so long as you don't ask awkward questions."

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He raised the curtain before the doorway and led Jonah through dark corridors to the enclosed court, which in that climate was the family living-room. It was paved with glazed tiles, a sign of gentility, and was covered with an awning. In the centre of the court was a fountain which played with a silvery tinkle and diffused a pleasant coolness. By it sat the wife and daughter. Jonah bowed to them, and Nahum said: "Here I am with the prophet! As you see, a miracle has happened. Last night the man was near death, to-day he is as fit as a fiddle. We have every right to think that the Lord intends to do great things through him, and that he will bring good luck to our house."

Leah smiled at Jonah, saying that her husband's friend was welcome. She was a pious woman, but she felt a little disappointed, as it was the first time she had seen a real prophet and she had always imagined such a man wore a halo, just as children believe that kings always go about with gold crowns on their heads.

Jonah turned towards Sarah, and a wave of warm feeling surged through his heart. That was the sort of woman one ought to have for one's own, he thought in all innocence. She was young and beautiful and appeared to be gentle. True, she was slightly built and one might not get much work out of her, but her father must certainly be rich, so that might not matter so much. She was small too and not so fat as he had pictured his intended—chiefly because he had always heard it said that a thin wife was no good—but she had a beautiful face, round and placid as the moon. She was pale, like all well-to-do women who could avoid being burnt brown by the sun, and she had fine almond eyes and a small mouth with red lips. Lie hoped they were natural. Yes, she was altogether a beauty,

and it was sheer folly for a poor prophet to raise his eyes to her. He greeted her courteously, but with some condescension. For she was scarcely more than a child.

"And now, my friend," said Nahum, "you may go about my house just as you please. Regard it as your own. Eat and grow fat. You will need all your strength on the day when you are to stand forth and preach to the great city of Nineveh. But if the Lord is with you, you will be listened to. And I believe he is with you, since he has stopped you at the gate of death."

Jonah thanked him and went out to look at Nahum's property. His house was situated, not in a garden, but in a park. The houses of all great folks were laid out in the same fashion as the city itself. They took up a great deal of room. A wide and lofty wall surrounded the property and it was guarded by slaves day and night. Inside the wall lay gardens and fields and many houses, the finest of which was that of the owner. This stood on a raised platform, like the temples and palaces, but of course only a few feet above ground level.

Jonah pried everywhere. He saw stables, cowhouses and sheep-pens. He saw the poultry yard and the fish-pond. He looked into warehouses and store-rooms. Slaves were everywhere, busy with goods and animals. They were swarthy creatures, descendents of a population subdued thousands of years before, but living on in the basement storey of society—growling, but far too stupid and lazy to revolt.

"What a house," said Jonah, clapping his hands together. "Yes, the Lord requiteth the faithful," he said, repeating an old saying without really meaning anything by it, for he thought his own experience tended in another direction.

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It surprised Jonah to see so many men in Nahum's house. Many of them were strolling about the park with nothing to do, or were exercising themselves in the use of arms or were busy with camels or horses. There was a big house standing apart, where these men lived as in barracks. They were a rough lot to look at, more like desert robbers than peaceable townsmen. When he tried to get into conversation with them, they avoided him. Perhaps they didn't understand a word he said. Many of them seemed to be half-savage people from distant parts of the kingdom.

Jonah remarked to Nahum: "You have many men in your service, I see." "Yes, yes," said Nahum. "It's necessary for a merchant—"

"What do you deal in?" asked Jonah.

Nahum shrugged his shoulders and said it was difficult to explain: "but," he added, "you needn't be afraid. They say I'm the most honest man in Nineveh. Perhaps that's not saying much, but it's something!"

"Do you find business good?" asked Jonah.

"I can't complain," replied Nahum. "Our King Sargon is a sensible man and leaves us free to trade, so long as he gets his taxes. It'll be worse when his son Sennacherib comes to the throne. He's a proud and arrogant man, fond of the military and despises the citizens."

"Then is Sargon in bad health, since you're expecting his son to ascend the throne?" asked Jonah.

"Little prophet," said Nahum; "it's always a perilous thing to be King of Assyria. Especially if one has an ambitious son."

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## VI

IN A hall of the royal palace outside Nineveh sat three persons. The hall was as huge and empty as that of a railway terminus, but in the middle of the vast marble floor was a green carpet with three silk cushions, on which the three persons sat, looking like mites in the vast room, of which they occupied so little. There was an object in this: they did not wish to be overheard. They knew that listening slaves always stood behind the great curtain at the end of the hall. They spoke in hushed voices and put their heads together. This was a habit; such caution was always necessary in the royal palace.

The hall had the solemn effect of a cathedral. Grave giants of stone, reaching from floor to roof, stood on guard along the walls, supporting on their lions' heads the mighty cedar beams that formed the ceiling. Between the giants were reliefs showing dying men, tortured prisoners, terrifying gods conjuring up tempests, and soldiers fighting on horseback and in chariots. There was no drawing-room atmosphere about the place; it was as unpleasant as a slaughter-house. And yet it was the King's favourite resort.

He spent many hours of the day walking upon the smooth black marble floor, alone with the reflection of himself cast back from the polished stone. He went barefoot, as did all his subjects when indoors. The soft flop-flop of his soles could be heard as he walked backwards and forwards. Now and again the sound ceased, and then it was known that he stood absently

reading one of the inscriptions under the reliefs: "I, Nissur-Banipal, razed the frontier fortress Rashun to the ground and cast its prince

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to the lions. I carried away his cattle, I made slaves of his women and children. Two thousand six hundred armed men did I slay. The god Sin is my helper." It was the placid Moon-god that he cited as his accomplice.

There were other inscriptions that referred to Sargon himself: "I, Sargon, the chosen, descended from the circle of the gods. The god says: Behold, Sargon is my son. I bless the land of Assyria when he spreads out his hands over the plain, but if he clench his hand in wrath, I curse it." Such a king was Sargon, to whom history has given the Roman numeral II to distinguish him from the Sargon of remote antiquity.

Occasionally he might walk to the end of the hall, where hung a copper shield as big as a round dinner-table. He would pick up a hammer of gilt bronze from the floor and strike a blow on the shield. It gave a reverberating sound which lingered quivering in the air, but the moment it was heard the quiet palace woke to life. Slaves came running in on bare feet. The royal man, who was regarded as something between a god and a lunatic, might desire the most extraordinary things. Is it roast venison? The kitchen slaves are ready. Does he ask for fish? The man with the net is at hand to run to the fish-pond. Or is it wine, or a woman from the harem? Or a harper? They are all present, waiting intently. But when the bowing slaves stand before him listening with heads averted, lest a glance from their eyes might defile his mantle, he says in a calm voice: "Bring me a cup of ice-cold water!" They breathe more freely, it might just as easily have occurred to him to demand the head of the Lord Privy Seal on a charger.

He was a pale little man with the same ivory tint as the maggots you find in the earth. The sun never shone

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upon him. He was like the mysterious ruler of a beehive or an anthill. He lived in a golden cage and was fed on sugared cakes and apparently had his will in everything; but on the day when his will crossed that of the magnates of his country, he would die by the dispensation of providence.

There was a tormented look about this King, and it was not surprising that when the wind was in certain quarters he was afflicted with insanity. He lived in regal state, but like a lobster on ice in a fishmonger's window.

Just as these poor languid creatures he moved his hands automatically and aimlessly; for the lobsters are continually beckoning mournfully with their claws. His left arm was bare to the shoulder and on it was a thick gold ring; but it was a schoolboy's arm, not a man's. It was too thin.

He was dressed in a bright red garment of thick silk. It was frightfully oppressive in the heat, but he was obliged to wear it, as it was the right thing. By his side lay a scented linen cloth, with which he constantly mopped his forehead. For he perspired freely and according to Assyrian ideas that was a very vulgar sign; but he couldn't help it, it was constitutional. The beads trickled down his high smooth forehead and plastered his thin hair against his skull, making him look more like a man on the rack than one on a throne.

Here he sat with the two persons who were in his confidence. They were the chief eunuch Samsin and his favourite wife Kallista, who was a Greek and not to be confused with his principal wife, who was a Median princess. They each sat on a cushion, but the King's was a foot higher than theirs.

It was a warm day, and the King had taken off his beard

and fanned himself with it as he talked. He was beardless by nature, but that could not be permitted in an Assyrian King. He had to have a beard, if for no other reason than to have something to swear by. The royal barber made him a curly one of gnu's hair—the tuft below that animal's chin. The beard was dyed red, as fashion demanded—an ugly coppery red at that.

He was about fifty and had an intelligent face, but it was spoilt by his smile, which was crooked, fleeting and untrustworthy. It looked as if he was forcing a laugh to avoid bursting into a rage. And suddenly he would be lost in thought and would look at those who addressed him with the kind of unembarrassed curiosity people show in a monkey-house. He seemed to be asking himself whether they could really be human.

The eunuch was a crafty man with a squeaky boy's voice and great melancholy pouches under his eyes. Naturally he was fat, and when he walked he lifted his feet like an elephant. The Greek woman was white, intelligent and charming.

The King turned to her: "You say there is something peculiar to your country which is not to be found elsewhere." He spoke in a gentle, refined voice: "Tell me what it is."

She looked at him with her deep blue eyes and said in her cello voice: "It is freedom, O King!"

At this the eunuch gave a warning cough, but the King looked at him and smiled. He could not be angry with this beautiful woman, who was to him what a tame mouse is to a prisoner for life. "Then you have no kings?" he said.

Kallista, the Greek, knew that the King was her slave. She bridled with pride as she answered: "We are a nation of kings!"

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"Curious, that," said the King. "Then who is to command and who is to obey?"

The eunuch attempted to explain. He raised his hand and held it before his mouth, as court etiquette demanded of an official when addressing the King; but the great Sargon waved his hand, like an officer signalling to a private that he need not salute.

Samsin said: "A marvellous thing once happened here in our country. It was when we, before all other nations, received the Law. Without law no trade and no great enterprise can be set on foot, since there is no security of property. The Law was the gift of the gods, for it gave security. But now comes the next step on the path of humanity, O King. This is freedom. That too is a great matter. And the first one who has a claim to freedom is the King."

Why the King? If Sargon was so fond of talking about these new and dangerous things it was because he was like a child that asks to be told ghost stories to get a thrill of fear. For he was afraid of these ideas which he did not understand, but he guessed there was something great in, them. "Then is the King not free?" he asked, giving them such a shrewd and cunning look that they feared he might be going to have one of his fits.

"No!" said the Greek. "The King is not free when he has to take his orders from the priests."

The King's lower lip quivered unpleasantly and he flourished the gnu's tail excitedly. "From the gods, Kallista," he corrected. "Not from the priests, but the gods."

"Who are the gods?" she asked. "It is possible that certain signs can be traced in the path of the stars—"

But now the eunuch interrupted her, lest she should make trouble by overstepping the bounds of the King's

patience. "Speak of the gods with respect! Who the gods may be is a doubtful question. Their nature is as far above ours as the life of men is above that of the ants. Who would take upon himself to explain to an ant what man is? It is beyond dispute that the gods give us omens in many ways, and these omens are interpreted by the priests. How else should we know what is the will of the gods?"

Kallista said it might be right enough about the will of the gods, but if the priests were greedy of power and proclaimed their own will as that of the gods—what then?

Samsin had to admit that this was conceivable, and the King too harboured a suspicion that it was sometimes the case; but it was not advisable to speak about it, so the King said: "What about this freedom? How would it benefit me to give freedom to others?"

Kallista was ready at once with one of her patronising answers. But this patronising air suits her, thought the King. She said: "It is a greater thing to rule over equals than over slaves."

The King was nevertheless astonished. He gave Samsin a questioning glance and said, "Have I any equals?"

"No," the eunuch hastened to answer. "There is none like the King!"

The King was reassured and said in a friendly tone: "It sounds incredible too that every man in Greece should understand what is for the good of society."

"They don't either," said Kallista; "not in detail. It is the same with this as with art. We can't make statues like those in this hall, but we can see if they're right or wrong—I mean, if they have noses, eyes and fingers like men's, if it's men they are to represent. There is something about a statue which pleases or repels us, without our being able to say what it is; but we can feel if it radiates sublimity and

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strength—otherwise it is not a work of art. The people of a free country have the same feeling about its government. They cannot say what ought to be done, but they have a sense which tells them whether what is done is right or wrong."

"And what do the priests say?" asked the King.

"They don't say anything unless they're asked," said Samsin.

"Ah, there we have it!" said the King.

From the antechamber came the melodious sound of clanging instruments which the temple slaves carried before a priest when he was out on a sacred mission. They walked in front jangling these metal timbrels, and on seeing the procession the people bowed to the ground in reverence. The King told Samsin to bring in the priest, and when the eunuch had gone he patted the Greek woman on the cheek, saying: "You have bold thoughts, Kallista. When the time is ripe you will see that my thoughts can be equally bold. Go now!"

She bowed to the floor and veiled her face, but as she went she gathered up her robe so that he could not avoid seeing the shapeliness of her legs. And in this gesture she showed the difference between the old world and the new. There were Assyrian women who had shapely legs and liked to show them, but none of them could do it so elegantly as a Greek. There was something instinctive about it, connected with the fact that the Assyrian woman was only a man's chattel, whereas the free Greek regarded herself as his fellow.

There was a perpetual bitterness in the King's soul which poisoned his existence; he thought: How wonderful it would be to possess this woman, and to be a goat-herd who could be certain she loved him for his own sake.

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He tied the false beard on his chin with a weary air. What joy was there in being King, if one couldn't even get one's beard to grow! Then Samsin entered with the priest. The feeble old person threw himself on the marble floor and handed a clay tablet to the eunuch, who passed it on to the King. But the King would not accept it. He said to Samsin: "Read!"

Samsin took the tablet out of its cover and read: "The god speaks to King Sargon, his servant and good son. This knowledge I have set in the stars. On the first day of the week Sargon shall hold the great Council and summon the chief priest Munbur, who by my grace will make known to the King the will of the gods. On the next day the King shall go hunting, seated upon the elephant that was presented to him by the prince of the mountain country. On the third day he is to visit the temple of the Moon-god, where he will sacrifice five young bulls and twelve white rams. On the next day the King will rest—"

A detailed programme of work for the whole week. The King listened with his wry smile, and there was a malicious gleam in his eyes. He said:

"Let the priests say to the chief priest that the King is happy that the gods have spoken with such great wisdom."

Samsin passed on his words. The priest bumped his forehead against the floor and mumbled: "Sargon is great. He is the beloved son of the gods. He makes his people happy. Assur swells with fatness under his blessed rule!"

"Take him out," said the King wearily.

The next comer was a captain of the host, dusty and unwashed from the field of battle; but it was the privilege of heroes to appear before the King not in court dress—always providing that they were successful heroes and brought good news. The others were never admitted.

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"Great King!" he said. "You have again won a battle. This time it is the Hittites you have vanquished. One of their armies had taken up a position in the mountains and assumed a threatening attitude. You sought them out with your customary lion's courage, and there was a fierce fight in the mountain pass. You crushed the enemy! During the battle you charged in your war chariot, always present where the danger was greatest. At last you forced your way to the tent of the Hittite King and cut him down with your own hand."

The King sat with closed eyes and looked tired. His oddity showed itself in a dislike of being the object of gross flattery. He had never yet been present at a battle. He had never stood in a war chariot. In his younger days, when he was in a bad humour, he used to refresh himself by trying to behead slaves with his own hand; but he could never do it successfully, and others had to finish the disagreeable job for him. Wiry should he be puffed up into a hero? He was King, and what more can one be in this world?

Nevertheless he did not protest, for he was wise enough to know that the honest old warrior would never understand him. To a soldier it was entirely a matter of course that the King should be given honour for heroic deeds he had never performed. It had always been so. If anyone had asked: How can the King sit in his palace in Nineveh and win victories in the mountains hundreds of miles away? How can he slay a Hittite King when he isn't there?—the old warrior would have been confused and could only have answered: I never thought of that—and what's more, I won't think of it, for it's contrary to the respect I owe to my lord. Nothing is impossible to the King!

But if there was a priest present he would come to the

rescue, saying: The explanation is perfectly simple and easy of comprehension. The King is filled with the spirit of the gods, and the army is filled with the spirit of the King. That is what gives it strength to conquer. Even if the King's person is not present, his spiritual self is at the head of his army, unseen. Is not that perfectly clear? And the old warrior, unable to understand a word of what the priest said, would mutter with a bow that the wisdom of the gods was unfathomable.

The King was well aware of this, and therefore he did not get angry with the messenger. He said in a friendly tone, like a grown-up person entering into a children's game: "Did I take many prisoners?"

"Over three thousand, great King!"

"Did I get much cattle?"

"Vast herds, which are now on the way to the capital, great King!"

The King turned to Samsin: "See that this man is given a robe of honour. I resolve that a tablet be set up in the mountain pass where the battle was fought with a complete account of the victory and of my share in it. But without any exaggeration. The stone-masons are acquainted with my desires in such matters."

Samsin bowed and said it should be done. The old warrior was led out, and the King was left alone with his sad thoughts, entirely unimpressed by the victory. For he had never heard of anything but victories. If it should happen that one of his armies retreated, that was merely to draw the enemy on; and if it was surrounded and cut to pieces, he did not hear of it till many months after, on casually asking what had become of the army that marched against the Persians. He was told it had accomplished its task and gone home.

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He put his hands behind his back and wandered up and down his huge waiting-room, thinking: It's sad they can't find anything honourable to say about me without it's being a lie. Am I worth nothing at all as a man? Or is it because they don't know me? Who does know a king? I'm not a real living creature—I'm a symbol! I'm not a person who can be contradicted or wrangled with or loved or cursed. I'm a prisoner in a golden cage. And if I permit myself to shake the bars they think I'm mad!

When thoughts like these were in his mind a savage gleam came into his eyes. The great wrath rose within him. He said to himself: If I were the Almighty I'd make it rain fire and brimstone over the whole earth for forty days and forty nights. That affair of the Deluge was only a half-measure!

Samsin came in again to announce that the King's son, the exalted and brilliant Sennacherib, wished to be admitted to his father's divine presence. Sargon made a face like a person smelling at a nasty medicine. He couldn't bear this son. It was one of the miseries of court life in ancient times that fathers and sons were forced to hate each other: the son waited impatiently for his father to make room for him. He was in constant danger of his life, as it had so often happened that a suspicious father threw his son into prison and had him despatched in a manner suited to his rank. The father knew of course from his own youth that the son was surrounded by flatterers who told him that everything his father did was quite wrong, and that the country longed for the day when his excellent son should ascend the throne. For things did not move fast enough for these young fellows.

Then Sennacherib came swaggering in, so tall and broad of limb that the King could never help thinking his

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principal wife must have something on her conscience. This son was not a bit like him. He tramped on the floor with heavy marching boots, he jingled with iron, and he loved sabre-rattling and the din of war.

This youth was only three-and-twenty, but he had the beard of a patriarch. This beard was enough in itself to make his father hate him; it was just the sort of beard he had always wanted for himself. This was only a small matter, but it pained him excessively that there were bounds to his will.

Sennacherib did not bow before his father. He was insolent—just as the Assyrians liked to see a royal man. He loved war and banquets. It made him happy to sit in judgment over his enemies, not that he desired to exercise justice, but he wished to crush all opposition. This was just what the average Assyrian himself wanted to do, when he had the chance.

Sennacherib loved everything that was an abomination to his father. He was fond of parades, military music, the rumbling of war chariots, the neighing of horses, the striking of shields, and long ranks of men who stood like statues and could fling their arms and legs about at the word of command. The spiritual side of existence only interested him when it was

represented by priests, soothsayers and astrologers. He was pious with a narrow-minded sternness that was so thorough-paced as almost to make him holy.

All this was known to Sargon. He could see that this son had every quality for stealing the heart of the people from him. But he repressed his dislike and said in a friendly tone: "Whence come you, my son?"

"From the land of the Chaldees," said his son.

"They are bad people," said Sargon. "All their thought is of crafty tricks."

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"They won't give us any trouble for some time to come," said his son. "I have caused a hundred thousand Chaldees to be slain, I have burnt three hundred towns, I have cut down their palm-trees, filled their wells with camel-dung and taken their cattle from them. The country is now a desert and an awe-inspiring monument to the power of Assyria."

"But what about me?" asked Sargon in a weak voice. "What did I accomplish?"

"I don't know," said his son coldly. "I didn't see you on the fields of battle."

Sargon came near to admiring the fellow for daring to say this in his father's face. He thought: If this boy becomes King one day, the people won't have an easy time! But he said in a kindly tone: "You deal harshly, my son. I am told that in other realms the desire of the princes is to make their people happy, but you pass over countries like an angel of death!"

"It's necessary," said his son defiantly. "Assyria cannot be happy till we have subdued Babylon and laid Egypt under tribute. The whole world is to bow the knee before our gods."

"The world is wide, my son," said Sargon mildly. "Do you know the saying of a Greek oracle that he who declares war on the whole world is doomed to lose?"

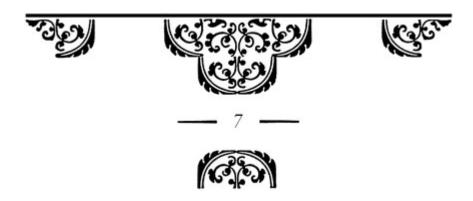
Sennacherib replied—in words he had heard from the priests—that the Greeks were a people of inflated wind-bags. The poison of world-conquest was in him. The priests had promised him victory. "The stars say that the whole world will be mine," he said; "and a great King cannot have peace in his soul until he possesses *all*!"

Ah, the stars, thought Sargon bitterly. They can be put to many uses. Not many Assyrian Kings have the

stars permitted to die a natural death. When the King is in the way of the priesthood it will always be found that one of the unlucky stars has wandered into the King's house in the heavens. He rises cheerfully in the morning, plays ball with his women, fishes perhaps in the fish-pond with a silver hook, and says to-morrow he will be carried to his park for a peacock-hunt with net and bow; but before night he will hang his head; he has eaten something which disagrees with him. At once a cooling drink is sent from the temple and he swallows it, after which he turns blue in the face and lies down to die.

Sargon did not like this plain-spoken talk of what his son would do when he came into power. And there stood Sennacherib, straddling like a young buffalo calf, reeking of vitality and full of confidence in the future, since he relied on the support of the gods.

And then he has a beard! Isn't that damnable? thought Sargon. He screwed up his eyes as he always did when he didn't want it to be seen that they were red-rimmed from anger. His fingers twitched nervously at the gnu's tail and he said to himself: Something must be done to clip this fellow's wings before he flies too high.



For word came unto the King of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

s Jonah walked in Nahum's garden he was pale with stage-fright as the time drew near when he was to stand forth and preach to the people. He felt like a boxer about to enter the ring. True, he had been given proof that the Lord would not take his hand from him, and he was certain that truth would prevail; but at the same time he knew there would be some nasty knocks in the process.

Nahum comforted him, saying that a champion of the Lord mustn't fear being hurt. "At the worst," he said, "they can only kill you, and that's nothing to speak of, if you know you're dying in a good cause! I've tried being half killed myself lots of times. It isn't so bad as you think. The first whacks hurt, but you soon get so many that you don't really feel anything. Afterwards if you wake up alive, that's fine; and if you wake up in Abraham's bosom, that's not so bad either."

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But Nahum didn't understand Jonah, for Nahum was a fighter by nature and Jonah was a thinker. The little man shuddered as he recalled his horrible sensations in the vegetable market when he got a smack in the face from a rotten watermelon. It was like the explosion of a football full of pulp. "But that doesn't kill you," remarked Nahum. No, perhaps not, but it wears out your nerves having to face the public, knowing it may come any moment.

The women understood him better. They coddled him and couldn't do enough for him, but even that did not calm him. There was something disquieting about this kindness, as though he were being petted like a kitten before it was put into a sack to be drowned. On the other hand it warmed his heart when Sarah took his hand and said: "I understand quite well that you're afraid. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that. I shall pray to the Lord to strengthen you."

Good child, thought Jonah. Perhaps she loves me? He availed himself of the opportunity to try to bring off a bargain with the Lord. "If I make a good job of this," he said, "will you give me this little woman to wife?" But the Lord vouchsafed no answer. No, it doesn't look as if there's any advance to be had here, thought Jonah bitterly.

He had counted on his fingers, and when the day arrived he was as uneasy as a hen that is going to lay an egg and can't make up her mind where to do it. He made for an out-of-the-way corner in the garden and called a dress rehearsal. This time he would deliver a sensible and well-considered speech, so as not to set everybody by the ears. But it wasn't so easy to tell people they were murderers, thieves, scoundrels and evil-livers without offending

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them. He flung the lappet of his cloak over his shoulder, as he had seen great orators do, and began: "Ye men and women of Nineveh—er—er—" His brain was empty, and to his other anxieties was added the fear that he would make a fiasco.

Then the Voice spoke within him, saying: "My son Jonah, leave what you are to say to me. My strength will inspire you when the moment arrives."

"Thanks," said Jonah, "but it's my back that will feel it when you tell people what they don't like to hear." In other words he wanted to be able to censor the great Voice.

"My son," it said, "that is just what spoil's all the poets, prophets, statesmen and other gifted men. They thrust the spirit aside at the decisive moment, when they need it most of all. But the Work demands that the right words be spoken unabridged. Then all will be accomplished as predetermined.

"Yours is a great task!" said the Voice. "For you are not to be one of the twopenny prophets who are simply suffering from high blood-pressure and

think the gods speak through their mouths when they blow off their own ill-temper. You are not to be one of these don't-you-believe-what-I'm-telling-you sages who preach threadbare truths with spittle foaming on their lips and eyes starting out of their heads. Don't trouble yourself to retail cheap truths that people are always anxious to hear: that the beer-mugs are made too thick in the bottom so that they don't get full measure, or that the dab of jam on the millet cakes isn't so big as it was in the good old days."

Jonah gave a superior smile. He had never wished to be a prophet either great or small, but as the Voice had picked him out, he was bound to obey. He went to

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Nahum and said: "I must go now. I'm driven from within. Perhaps you will never see me again. But that doesn't matter. Think kindly of me!" He went from one to another pressing their hands; he saw their looks of concern and had a feeling that he was attending his own funeral.

Sarah had great tears in her eyes, and this pleased him in a strange and melancholy way. "The Lord be with you!" she said.

Leah said: "Spit on him, Sarah! Spit three times. That brings luck."

And Sarah spat with unctuous fervour. Jonah thanked her and went away, lonely as every man in the great moments of his life.

As he passed through the gate the slaves watched him wondering at the decent little man being tipsy so early in the day. For he was staggering like a drunken man. He kept his body perfectly rigid, as though it resisted being carried along, but his legs worked away officiously. He wanted to take his time, for one doesn't run to meet misfortune; but his legs were in a hurry and made for the great square before the Temple of the Sun, where there was always a great crowd of people, but where one might also expect to find the most fanatical idolaters.

In the middle of the square was a well surrounded by a high marble parapet. There was always a concourse of water-carriers filling their bags of skin and female slaves bringing pitchers. Jonah's feet—a pair of turned-in, rather flat feet—made straight for this well, though Jonah tried to persuade them to choose a less challenging spot. They squeezed him in among the swarm of people, and quite contrary to his modest disposition he pushed folks out of the way without vouchsafing them an excuse when

they swore at him. He stared before him like a somnambulist. His pupils seemed screwed fast in their sockets, they could only look straight ahead. Many people made way, thinking he was possessed; but when he mounted the parapet of the well and stood there swaying like a clown taking off a tight-rope act, they understood that he meant to address the people.

Nobody was surprised at this. In Nineveh a prophet arose every other day, to say nothing of the malcontents who could only air their grievances in this way, as there were no newspapers. It was in the nature of these Semitic people to love judging and punishing. They felt themselves to be the salt of the earth—well, more than that—the marvellous juice we carry in our stomachs, which dissolves everything, but at the same time renders substances digestible by splitting them up. They had a keen eye for all the follies of the world, and occasionally—in a good-natured ironical light—for some of their own.

As Jonah stood on the parapet of the well and raised his hand there was a hush of expectation in the square. He was a new turn and looked amusingly bewildered, so he promised some entertainment. And Jonah looked out on the multitude, a confusion of brown faces, grey cloaks, pointed hats of faded straw—here and there a woman's flowered robe—and above them all the sparkling pale blue sky and as a background the perpendicular yellow walls of the Temple of the Sun. All these people stood like himself with turned-in toes shifting in the dust, but here and there he could already see one of them bending down to pick up something, perhaps a stone, perhaps one of the firm balls the asses left behind them. At this his courage sank, his lips turned dry, and he could not find words. But the spirit stirred within him. It took possession

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of him, like a prompter creeping into his box. Now he began to speak:

"Ye people of Nineveh! The Lord says: Repent while there is yet time, or I will cause my wrath to descend upon you. For there is no strength in your gods or in your sacrifices. There is but one God, says the Lord. I dwell not in temple-towers raised by men's hands out of river mud. I dwell in high heaven. I take no pleasure in the blood of beasts, but in the good deeds of men. There is but one God and one King!"

"Oh," the people said to one another, "this is one of those tiresome bores who talk about gods." A man cried out: "Say something about the salt tax. That's the kind of thing that interests folks. And what about the new

regulations for fishing in the river? Or the fines for getting through the gates after hours? These things concern us all; the priests must see to that about the gods."

Jonah knew nothing about the salt tax or the fishing dues, and the spirit within him went on: "I, the Lord," it said, "will smite Nineveh with pestilence and sickness, burning drought and multitudes of enemies, if you do not turn from gods of stone, wood and silver and seek the one true God. How can a nation expect to be great if it puts its trust in demons and powerless shadows? Wherever people believe in impotent gods there is no strength in their weapons or implements. Turn away from your priests! I, the Lord, will not be served by men in long robes, nor by temple harlots or priestesses who paint their faces. I abhor holy men who offer me the hearts of beasts but prevent men from bringing me their own hearts that I may bless them. There are far too many seeking to rule in this land. You have only need for two: God and the King!"

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Then came the first stone. It was thrown with a good will, but by a weak hand—presumably a priest's; it did not hit Jonah, but whistled past his ear, as he ducked like a recruit who hears the bullets whizzing for the first time. He heard angry cries: "Let us seize this Jew and take him before the priests! Let him be cast into the fiery furnace or the lions' den! Shall these foreigners insult the gods of our country?" They pressed forward and caught hold of his cloak, but he clung to the iron railing of the well, shouting: "Let go, or I'll jump into the well!" That was the worst threat he could make, for then it would be defiled.

They did not let him go for all that. They would not miss the chance of doing a deed which was agreeable to the gods and not displeasing to themselves either. One man had got hold of his legs and they belaboured him with sticks to make him let go of the parapet.

Suddenly a voice cried: "Stop!" At that moment the dull cracks of leather whips were heard, a sign that persons of quality were approaching—those beings of a higher sphere who imposed respect and a clear road by means of armed slaves. The men who were hauling at Jonah let him go and drew back, leaving an open passage through the mob, and at the end of this passage he saw a creature advancing towards him—a person in a robe that was so ample, so long and so ornate that he thought he was looking at a fat woman.

But it was a man. It was the King's chief eunuch, Samsin, who walked with such difficulty on account of his obesity. He waddled along looking all around him, as though making a note of every single face and imprinting it on his memory. He smiled, but it was an unpleasant smile which might have been induced as the

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result of an operation. His eyes were cold and hard.

The people stood perfectly still, staring at this man as he gathered his robe about him with a podgy hand bedizened with rings. The whip-bearers now walked on each side of him, and if a foot ventured outside the ranks the lash was there as a reminder. But the man still smiled, as though it was only a good joke. On reaching the well he scanned Jonah closely—and Jonah looked back at him, but with shifty, uncertain eyes. He did not know whether to jump down from the well, and he had an enormous respect for the men with the whips and for the fat man's cold serpent's glance.

Then Samsin made a gesture of the hand, like a distinguished person encouraging a flurried actor to go on with his part. He said slowly and in a thin, squeaky voice: "Proceed, Jew, proceed!"

Jonah swallowed his saliva, gurgling with nervousness. Face to face with this man he could not possibly say what he thought of Nineveh. But he didn't have to, as the spirit was stirring again. It began to speak, and he heard his own voice, distant and unreal. He was a medium who had not quite lost consciousness, and he whispered to himself: What is it that's happening to me? Is it really me, talking with this exaltation and power? Whence did I get these strong, proud words? And how have I acquired this deep tuba-voice?

"There is only one salvation for Assur," said the Voice. "Submit yourselves to the law of the Lord! Renounce your gods and turn to the only God who can help you, when the peoples from the western mountains fall upon you like a swarm of locusts. One God and one King—that is your future!

"Do not be misled by the priests, who collect temple

dues, despoil the poor and give you stones for bread, since they fill you with superstition instead of with the living Word!"

Thus spoke the Voice, and it rose to high flights in painting the follies of the age and the punishment they would inevitably entail. The chief eunuch listened to the speech with great patience. It could not be seen that he was moved, but obviously he was thinking hard. His brow was furrowed. He saw that here was something which might serve as a lever for great schemes, and he raised his hand and said to Jonah: "That's enough!" Then he turned to the people and said: "We have heard this man; he is a true prophet. Go now every man to his house and think over that he has said."

They went off muttering under their voices, like supers leaving the stage. The men with the whips were going to help them along, but Samsin made a sign to them. "None of that," he said. "When the people obey they mustn't be interfered with." And the people were not grumbling, though they understood neither Jonah nor Samsin, but only had a vague suspicion that they had witnessed something extraordinary—perhaps portentous. It certainly could not be a good omen for a Jew to stand up in the middle of Nineveh and pour abuse on the gods of the city, and for the swells to take his part. Had the gods lost their power? That was a pretty business! When all the time we've been making gifts to them in good faith! But it won't do for a plain man to go into this. They said to one another: "We'll stick to the old gods till we get orders to believe in the new ones. We're religious people, we are."

Jonah stepped down from the parapet, dull and a little bit ashamed, for in a way he had been play-acting. He

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felt he must present a rather washed-out appearance, now that he was again no more than himself. Nor would he have said anything of the sort if it had been left to him—he couldn't make out where he got it from: one God and one King? As he understood it, his mission was to abuse Nineveh in good old-fashioned style. But it must have been correct all the same, for the Lord had shown him the most remarkable sign of all—the truth, which nobody really cared about, had found a protector! And the Voice said to him, quite privately: "Well, now you see, Jonah, if you had been patient and waited till the day *I* had appointed, you might have saved yourself much trouble. But you're not the first man who has spoilt the fireworks by letting them off at the wrong time."

Samsin turned to him and looked him over—not unkindly, but still not exactly as if it was a human being he had before him; for to tell the truth

the chief eunuch was more than a little arrogant—and he asked: "You're a Jew if I'm not mistaken? What's your name?"

- "Jonah, my lord."
- "Where do you live?"
- "With Nahum."
- "The desert robber?"

"Oh, no, no," said Jonah, shocked. "He's a most respectable man. He's a merchant!"

Samsin thought to himself: What use can we make of a Jew like this? The man has talent. And he said: "So this Lord you talk about is none other than the little Jew god? Do you believe the god of a few mountain tribes is stronger than the ancient and mighty gods of this country?"

Then Jonah answered with an earnestness by which he was himself impressed: "The God of whom I speak is

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no tribal god. He is the God of all humanity. You see, my lord, *that* is what is new about it."

"Yes," said Samsin, "I don't miss the point. Go in peace and keep quiet till you hear from me."

Samsin made a sign to his men. They brought up his litter and he got in without looking at Jonah or saying good-bye to him. He seemed to be entirely occupied with his thoughts.

II

THERE WAS joy in the house of Nahum when Jonah came home unhurt. He had knocked at the gate and when the slave opened it he had wobbled so limply that the slave imagined he was drunk and thought: Here's a fine holy man! But Jonah was merely overwhelmed, as anyone would be who had had a wonderful escape from a catastrophe and was surprised at being still alive.

Jonah went past him into the house, where he met Nahum, who asked in the needless way people do: "Are you alive?"

Then came Leah and Sarah, who twittered with oriental eloquence, clapping their hands in wonder and saying: "The Lord has been his shield! Truly the Lord has power and strength—when he chooses! Tell us! Tell us!"

"I came to the great square, you see," said Jonah, "and I got up on to the well. Then it began to speak within me."

"What did?"

"The Voice! You know, there is something that bubbles up in me, as it were. I scarcely knew what I was saying, for I was scared to death. The people tore at me and tried to pull me down from the well. Then a fat

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man came up, and they all knew him and were afraid of him. He said I was a prophet and I was to be allowed to speak. So I spoke. When I had finished the man said it was a good speech and I should hear further from him. Well, that's all!"

"Marvel of marvels!" said Nahum. "Verily, the age of miracles is not past."

They embraced Jonah and patted him, as if he was a racehorse that had won at a good price. For there was no more certain way of making your fortune in Nineveh than being taken up by a big man. Nineveh always inquired for names—who was backing the concern? What the concern might be was of less importance. It was an innocent form of snobbery, and its only weakness was that it promoted good and bad indifferently. And if, as here, it was a man who kept a bodyguard with leather whips, he must of course be one of the very biggest.

"Well," said Leah naïvely—but what can you expect of a woman? thought Jonah—"if you have a man like that behind you, you can safely leave your affairs in the hands of the Lord."

"Our friend is provided for," said Nahum. "Be sure of that. And now come and share our meal. We have a joint of fatted calf. You may thank Sarah for that; she had a feeling that it would be a blessed day."

They seated themselves on the carpet around the steaming joint, which lay in an earthen dish seething gently in its own fat. Leah cut off a piece and gave it to Jonah.

"That's the best part of the whole joint," she said. "Properly speaking it's for the master of the house, but to-day you're our honoured guest."

Jonah sat with the lump of meat in his hand and felt

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the warm grease trickling between his fingers. He stared absently at the titbit, for he was still in a state of semi-stupor, like a man just coming to

himself after an operation, and he said quietly, as though talking to himself: "So it must be the Lord's voice after all, speaking through me?"

"Have you ever doubted it?" said the astonished Nahum.

"God forgive me," replied Jonah. "I can't really have believed it before to-day."

They did not understand him. The prophet ought surely to be the first to believe in himself. So they thought, for they knew no better. How could they guess that the prophet's true martyrdom was nothing but the difficulty of believing that the Highest could descend into his confused brain, in which doubt—when its hour arrived—was just as lively as belief in happier moments? They could not conceive why Jonah was so quiet. Why did he not shout for joy? Why was he not swelling with pride and gratitude?

They had only seen the miracle as spectators. But Jonah had experienced it in himself. And how would the believers feel if the heavens opened and all the angels and patriarchs and the whole celestial hierarchy came out in procession, so that one could feel their garments and—if one were bold enough—pluck a feather from an archangel's wing? Marvellous! says the simple believer, not knowing that experiences of this nature have to be paid for by a terrible and long-lasting emptiness, since all that had once been a delectable anticipation has now been changed to brutal reality. The stifling of a mystic life.

Sarah stole a glance at Jonah, thinking: Could such a

holy man ever feel love for a woman? And if he did so, would it not be one of the rare ones—a very wise and pious woman?

To-day Jonah paid no attention to her, he was too much occupied with his own destiny. He felt like a man who has been in imminent danger of his life and has escaped, but who says to himself that nothing in the world will induce him to expose himself again. It annoyed him therefore that Nahum kept calling him prophet and saying how happy they were to have him in the house, as if he were some sort of a mascot, like a lizard or one of the herons that brought luck when they settled on the roof.

Their loquacious friendliness worried him, as he badly wanted to collect his thoughts. They kept on with their prophet this and prophet that, as though it were the greatest thing in the world that could happen to a man. But Jonah would have liked to be something on his own account—like Nahum—a man who did business and made money. For what was a

prophet? Only a speaking-tube, a mouthpiece, one who said nothing of himself, but nevertheless ran the risk of being called to account one fine day for the words that were uttered through him. Was that worthy of a man?

"I had hoped to be a business man," he said mournfully. "I should like to own camels and travel about buying up home-spun cloth. That's a thing I understand."

"Man!" said Nahum, "do you know what you're saying? What is a business man? His heart's in his purse and his soul's in his coffers—always in danger, like a kid pursued by birds of prey, by robbers and government officials! But what is a prophet? People bow before him in reverence. And what need has a prophet of this

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world's goods? He desires a night's lodging—what house is closed to the man of God? He is hungry—what table has no room for him who goes about the Lord's business?"

"Yes, yes," said Jonah impatiently; "but all the same one would like to have a personality of one's own."

"Personality? What are you talking about?" said Nahum. "Are we not all guided by the Lord?"

Leah thought this talk was getting foggy and she broke in, pressing Jonah to take more meat. "Good food strengthens the heart," she said. "A full stomach leaves no room for sad thoughts."

Jonah thanked her, but he could not eat. He was sore with himself, feeling he was an unworthy wretch with his peevishness and ingratitude just when the Lord had shown him kindness—the Lord who had guided him over sea and over mountains, through the desert and now into the great city. But what had it all come to? He was as poor this day as when he arrived. And how can a man measure his progress except by the surplus his life has to show?

"Friends," he said, "thanks for all your kindness, but I must be alone with myself. I am going into my chamber. I wish to speak with the Lord."

"By all means—by all means," said Nahum eagerly. "And when you speak to him you might remind him in all modesty of me and my house."

Jonah went out with bowed head, and they watched him go, wondering and unable to understand him.

"Prophets are never quite right in the head," said Nahum. "It's their calling that makes them like that. The Lord seems to ride them to death

when he's harnessed them with his power. We must excuse them."

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As a slave girl went through the fore-court singing he dashed out, seized her by the arm and hissed in her face: "Stop your noise! The prophet's talking to the Lord."

The girl made many excuses and stole away on tiptoe, like the subordinates in an office, who dare not draw breath when the chief has got New York on the telephone.

Meanwhile the prophet lay on the mud floor of his chamber praying that the great honour might be taken from him, now that he had delivered the message as the Lord had commanded. He asked no reward, only that he might be set free, so that he could go his own way and go on building up his little private destiny.

The Voice was not to be moved. It said: "You are only now at the beginning of the Work. The wheel is turning, and you are bound to it. Why do you brood over your own insignificant destiny? What does your brief life matter compared with the millenniums in which your name will live?"

Then Jonah beat his breast in oriental despair and lamented over himself, saying: "I am but a little creature and what does it matter to me what people talk about when all that is left of me will be a grain of dust carried by the wind over the plains of Mesopotamia? I am a worm, with the modest desire that I may eat earth and make mould for those who come after me. Is that too much? Or is it degrading to live according to one's nature? I am content with little, if only I may live my own life—short though it be—and when the time comes die in peace and be wrapt in the oblivion which is the lot of mortals."

"It's no use talking to you," said the Voice. "You

don't understand that what you call modesty is the height of presumption. Woe to him who fails when the Work calls upon him!"

And with that the Voice vanished, in the usual way—suddenly and without warning, like the cuckoo of a clock when it has told us the time. It goes back into the works and the little door shuts with a smack which says: finished!

"God is God," said Jonah with a sigh. "He does what he pleases with a man. But when he decided to use me as a tool, why didn't he give me the

patience of a tool and the stupidity of a beast? Why wasn't I made as easily satisfied as the ox that draws the plough and turns the wheel and licks the hand that gives it its scanty feed?"

Questions like these were left unanswered by the Lord, unless it might be taken as an answer when a roar was heard in the street, as though an army had captured the city and filled it with cries and shouts, the clash of arms and the tramping of horses.

Jonah leapt up and ran out to the family.

"What can this be?" he asked.

"The Lord have mercy on us," said Nahum. "It can only be the Bodyguard!"

Ш

IN NINEVEH, where they knew neither ambulances, fire-engines nor police raids, there was nevertheless a body which created the same convulsion, so that on its approach people made for their houses and stood with scared looks peeping through the spy-hole of their doors till the storm had passed by.

This was the Royal Bodyguard. When it was called

out it was the rule that all its movements had to be performed at a furious pace. Even the most trifling errands were carried out with tremendous energy, since nothing that concerned the King's person was to be regarded as unimportant. It might happen that in the middle of the night he wished to hear a harper who lived at the other end of the city. Instantly the Bodyguard started out, dragged the man from his bed, galloped off with him, delivered him at the palace gate, where the slaves took charge of him and pulled him through the halls till he found himself sitting on a carpet behind a curtain—for the King only wished to hear his playing, not to see his inglorious face—a harp was thrust into his hands and he was ordered to play. And then, suddenly, when he was himself moved by the melody, blissfully rocking to and fro, they snatched the harp from him and said: "That'll do! The King's gone to sleep!"

But even if it was only a matter of a clay tablet to be delivered to a scribe, ten men and a leader dashed through the streets like motor-cyclists under the influence of alcohol. Fowls, pigs and people fled shrieking in all

directions. Those who were not quick enough were trampled down. There was only one thing that could check the Bodyguard; that was when they met an elephant in a narrow lane. But woe to the man in charge of the animal. Blows of the whip were rained on him and the elephant until he succeeded in backing the enraged beast so that the Guard could pass. It was quite inconceivable that it could step aside for anything on earth.

But there was an idea behind this indiscriminate use of the whip. It must not be supposed that the Bodyguard was hated; on the contrary, it was popular. Every Assyrian had in him something of its spirit, just as we were

told in the early days of the Congo that the negroes were never so happy as when they were put into uniform, given a rifle and ordered to massacre their own countrymen. Thus the whip was the symbol of power in antiquity. People reasoned that a King who can illtreat whom he pleases can also protect whom he pleases. And that was the kind of man they wanted.

It was now just the time of day when Nineveh took its siesta. A time when even the poorest street-sweeper had a right to put down his broom for a couple of hours while the heat of the sun was at its fiercest. Nineveh became as quiet as a village in the depths of the country; men, dogs, pigs and donkeys mingled fraternally as they rested in the shadow of the houses.

But to the King's Bodyguard all hours were alike. On arriving at Nahum's house it halted before the gate—not in good order like a troop of cavalry—it came like a snorting, rearing chaos, the horses spinning round several times before they could be checked. They stamped, neighed and thundered with their iron-shod hoofs, raising a cloud of dust. All this was a traditional exhibition of zeal, according to regulation. Men hammered at the gate with the hilts of their swords, calling out to open in the King's name.

Hardly had the slaves succeeded in drawing the bolts when the gate was flung open, squeezing those inside against the wall. The whole troop poured in calling for Jonah. "Where is he, the accursed son of a dog?" But they meant no harm by that, it was only their blunt soldierly way, to be taken as a joke.

Jonah came forward and stood trembling before the leader of the troop. This was a fellow who might have passed for a strong man in a circus, reminding one of

flesh-coloured tights stuffed with potatoes. The slave girls peeped out inquisitively and caught the seductive scent of leather foot-gear emanating from these men, who jingled handsomely with the scales of their armoured tunics.

Their leader said in a voice that sounded like a lion's roar: "Are you Jonah—the prophet?"

Jonah replied that his name was certainly Jonah and he was said to be a prophet, but he had done nothing wrong—not intentionally, at any rate.

"Come!" said the leader. "The King wants to see you."

They seized the little man as though he was a rag doll and flung him up on the back of a horse. It was useless for Jonah to protest that he was only a poor Jew and that it was inconceivable the King could be interested in him. But discussion was out of the question with the King's Bodyguard. Its sense of duty was not to be shaken, and its brains were not contrived for dealing with problems either. All Jonah's mumblings were drowned in fresh tramping, shouting and neighing, as the Bodyguard rode back the way it had come.

The slaves barred the gate and Nahum mopped his forehead, for he had been sweating with emotion, and he said to Leah: "Now he's either done for or he'll make his fortune."

Those who saw Jonah careering along thought it was an anthropoid ape stuck on a horse, from the way he lay on its back and clutched at its mane. The violent shaking almost made him seasick, and he envied the loudvoiced soldiers, who sat erect talking to each other as they rode, as if they were going to a picnic.

They rode thus for half an hour before reaching the

palace, which towered above the plain outside Nineveh, looking like a fortress. They rode up a ramp which led to the gate and into the fore-court, where they went through the customary circus performance of rearing horses, shouts of command and neighing. Strong hands pulled Jonah off his horse and dragged him into the first palace, where he was handed over to slaves, who, after the warriors, seemed as gentle as sick-nurses. They took him one under each arm, as though he could not walk by himself, and led him through long cool corridors to a room where he was received by a toothless old gentleman in yellow court costume.

"So this is the Jew Jonah!" said the old man. It could be seen he was thinking: What in the world does the King want with this scarecrow? But to Jonah he said: "An experience awaits you for which many would give a fortune. You are to see the King! But certain observances are necessary, and you will now be placed in the hands of trusted servants who will attend to these."

He struck a little copper disk; servants came in and took Jonah to the court barber. An ordinary man who was to be presented to the King had to be clean not only externally, but also internally. The barber and his assistant laid Jonah on a bench and gave him a rapid-acting clyster, which felt as if they were cleaning out his inside with a blowpipe. A moment later he was empty of all impurities. Then he was shaved all over the body, to make sure there was nothing alive on him. He was put into a bath-tub and scrubbed till he was as pink as it is possible for an ex-cameldriver to be. They rubbed him with ointment and dressed him in a brand-new undergarment of linen and over it a cloak of cotton. All this was done with the rapidity of a Chicago slaughterhouse.

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Jonah submitted patiently and asked no questions. He accepted this unpleasant cleansing as a new affliction, and by degrees it dawned on him how ridiculous it was for the prophets in his home country with their ragged beards to get up on the steps and shout that the Lord would give the King of Assyria to be eaten by the dogs and would drag him by the beard through the mire. They were like curs baying at the moon.

Then they led him through halls which seemed endless, through whole forests of polished marble columns, over courts paved with slabs that were smooth as mirrors and rubbed with grease, so that Jonah slipped up at every step, past ponds where goldfish swam, as big as pike, through pheasantries of fairy-like birds with golden plumage. The farther they penetrated into the palace, the more wonderful it became. Huge many-coloured monsters in glazed earthenware kept guard at the doors, and Jonah stared at them with the troubled feelings of a simple-minded person who visits a waxworks for the first time and is not certain whether the figures are alive.

At last they came to a palace where he was handed over to men in still finer clothes. Their faces were long and pale, as one might imagine the faces of angels. They were naturally surprised that this human louse was to be admitted to the palace; but those in attendance on the great never give expression to their wonder. They received him as a postman receives a package marked "With Care."

He was conducted to the antechamber, which was divided by a curtain from the hall in which the King was present. He supposed that he was now to be brought before the King, but that was contrary to court etiquette. They had rushed him through the length of Nineveh,

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had given him a lightning purification and dressed him at the speed of a quick-change artist—and now, when he was ready to appear, they said: "Sit on the floor and wait. The King is at dinner."

Behind the curtain soft music sounded, a flute accompanied by a lyre. Melancholy notes dripped from the quivering strings and the flute trilled like a nightingale. Mournful enough, but good for the digestion, so the wise men said. And that was very important, for it was a sad fact that this King, who, as he said himself, ruled over the whole world, was everlastingly at variance with his stomach.

The music ceased. Lyre and flute stole away on their bare toes. Slaves carried out golden dishes laden with food. Now Samsin, the chief eunuch, came and signed to Jonah that he was to approach; but before emerging from the curtain he was given precise instructions how many paces he was to walk, how many to crawl on his knees, and when he was to throw himself on his face and, without raising his head, to wriggle on his stomach the last bit of the way, until the King was pleased to give the sign that he might rise.

IV

SAMSIN RAISED the curtain and pushed Jonah before him into the great hall, where the King sat on his cushion amusing himself by playing with a ball of silk which he held by a string, so that it could not fly away from him.

Jonah took the prescribed number of paces with shaking knees, then crawled for a bit, fell on his face and wormed himself forward till he reached a red line on the paved floor, which Samsin had told him about. There he lay, waiting for the King to say something.

The King said nothing. He went on playing with his silken ball and glanced casually at Jonah, as one looks at an insect which is innocuous and gives no cause for alarm, but which on the other hand one would not think of touching.

Jonah lay low. His thoughts went to his God and he prayed in great fear that the Lord would give him strength. He was afraid of the stillness of this great hall, the uncanny pictures on the walls, and the cold smooth marble floor, on which he felt as helpless as a beetle on a sheet of glass.

Then the King said: "Get up!"

Jonah got up and behaved as he had been instructed by Samsin. Court etiquette demanded that on rising one shrank back and shaded one's eyes for a moment, as though dazzled by the splendour which was supposed to be given off by the King's person. Jonah performed this ritual, and naturally the King showed no surprise. As a matter of fact he was beginning to reconcile himself to the idea that possibly he did diffuse light.

"Are you Jonah?" he asked.

"Yes," said Jonah. "Great King!" prompted Samsin, standing behind him, and Jonah hastily added these words.

He now expected that the King would say more, but it looked as if the King had already forgotten him. There was about him something of the desultoriness to be observed in monkeys, continually picking up one thing and throwing away another. He dipped his hand into a little glass bowl and took out something to eat—confectionery, no doubt.

"You're a prophet?" he said all of a sudden. And in quite a pleasant voice.

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"Yes," replied Jonah. "I am a prophet, great King!"

"What is the name of your god?"

"The Lord!" said Jonah. He used the Hebrew word: Adonai.

"Is that a title or a name? Well, never mind, tell me about him."

Then Jonah called upon the Lord in his heart and said: "Behold, here I stand before the mightiest on earth, and my tongue is thick in my mouth, and my thoughts run confusedly hither and thither in my brain like a swarm of ants. Do you speak now!"

And when he had said this he felt the Spirit descending upon him so that he was filled as a bagpipe is filled with air, and he stood erect and spoke to Sargon as one great man speaks to another. He raised his head and looked at the King as though Sargon was a tiger in a zoological garden, a creature one regards with respect, thinking to oneself, no doubt he's dangerous, but when all's said and done he's nothing but a great cat. And this ruler over Assyria was no more than a man, and it was a question whether Jonah's Lord would deign to wipe his sandals on him.

"Know then, King Sargon," he said, "that my God holds the stars in his hand and plays with the earth as you play with a silken ball. He causes men to live and grass to grow, he brings forth ants and elephants. He has many names, but he himself is only One. Therefore it is his will that there shall not be many gods or many kings. One God and one King is enough!"

Sargon looked up and seemed flabbergasted at the boldness of the man. He said with surprise: "But what about the priests?"

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"The Lord says that there must be one rule and one doctrine," said Jonah. "Therefore the priests are to attend to heavenly matters, but they must not interfere with the things of this world."

At this point Samsin slipped up to the King, bent down to him and whispered: "Isn't this sensible talk?"

"Yes," said the King, "it sounds good. But what about Bel and Marduk and Ishtar and the other gods? Does the man mean to say they simply don't exist?"

Samsin smiled and said reassuringly that that was not the main thing. "Let every man believe what he pleases. A great King, who rules over many races, cannot attach his heart too closely to the god of one nation. But the new point about this man's doctrine is that it separates the law of the priests from the King's law. The holy men are to be entitled to rule in celestial affairs, but they must not interfere in politics, which they either don't understand—or what is worse—sometimes understand too well."

"You're right, Samsin," said the King. "But what do we know about the strange god?"

Then, before Samsin could answer, Jonah said: "The Lord who has sent me says: Woe to Assyria, if the people do not turn away from their vices, the priests from their arrogance and the great ones from their unrighteousness. The Lord says that unless they do this he will stretch out his hand and cause the people of the mountains to come down upon the country, and there shall not be left one stone upon another in Nineveh!"

"Is the man mad?" asked the King—by no means offended, merely astonished.

"He is a prophet," said Samsin. "Those kind of people

have no manners. But this is talk that the people will understand, and it will be a good thing to let the priests know that they are servants and not masters."

"Yes," said the King. "It's good talk." He played with his false beard and looked thoughtfully at Jonah.

"But," said he, "the chief priest told me there was once in Egypt a great King who revolted against the priestly caste. It didn't do him any good!"

"The time was not ripe," said Samsin. "To-day it is. And what is there to be afraid of? We are not the ones who say the priests are to submit. It's this man here who says so. Let him take the responsibility and let us see what effect his talk has on the people."

They put their heads together and spoke in a whisper, glancing at Jonah, whose heart sank within him, for their eyes had something of the look of men discussing the slaughter of an animal and considerately refraining from speaking aloud, as though they thought the animal could understand them. Then the King settled himself on his cushion and said in the artificial language used at audiences: "Our eyes have rested on this man with pleasure. We like his frankness and we bid him greet the god from whom he comes and say that we extend our favour even to distant gods. We desire that this man be given opportunity to tell our people of this strange god, called Adonai. Let him be given a robe of honour and let a section of the Foot Guards protect him, that he may be heard in peace. We specially charge him to dwell on the good idea that the priests should only be the King's servants and must abstain from politics. Lead the man out!"

Samsin made a sign and Jonah went through the laborious retreat, creeping on his stomach, shuffling on his knees and finally walking upright, but always backwards.

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When he reached the curtain Samsin said to him: "You heard the King's wishes. Be mindful of your own welfare. Do not forget that he who belies the King's good opinion will suffer much unpleasantness. Watchful eyes

will be upon you. Speak boldly. The King's favour will protect you, so long as you do his will. Now go!"

The slaves conducted Jonah through the labyrinth of the palace, till he arrived at the old gentleman, who gave him a nod of recognition and said: "The gods must love you, my son. You are to have a robe of honour, a guard to attend your person, a purse of silver pieces, and according to my orders I am to have the honour of appointing you Royal Shieldbearer."

Silver pieces! thought Jonah. That was all he had time to grasp of the good fortune which was being showered upon him. Silver pieces! There was beginning to be some method in this madness. If only it was real!

A slave came up with a yellow silken robe, so richly embroidered with birds and winged lions that it was heavy and stiff. The courtier placed it on Jonah's shoulders, saying solemnly: "I invest you with the robe of honour. It gives you the right of precedence at assemblies of the people, it exempts you from taxation, and it entitles you to pass gratis in and out of the city gates at the hours when payment is exacted."

Gratis! thought Jonah. Another charming little word. Gratis! The thought of getting something for nothing is sweet to the majority of people—and Jonah was just an average person. He looked upon his brilliant costume with admiration and thought how amusing it would be to pass through the gates at all sorts of unreasonable hours simply to enjoy his privilege.

The old gentleman struck a gong and a slave entered

with a red silk cushion on which lay a little round piece of silver no bigger than a sixpence. The courtier bowed before the cushion, took it from the slave and addressed Jonah with dignity: "In the name of the King, in the name of the Ruler of the World, in the name at which the earth trembles, I appoint you the King's Shieldbearer! You are to go before him in battle and to cover him with your body. When the King exposes himself to danger, you are to be at his side, and should it unfortunately happen that the King were to fall, you are to throw yourself on your sword; for it is not fitting that the Royal Shieldbearer should depart alive from the battlefield that has drunk the royal blood."

I might have known it, said Jonah to himself. We've come to the bitter drop in the cup of happiness. He knew he would make a bad shieldbearer, and he had no desire to throw himself on his sword, even if the King should fall. He said in a weak voice: "Isn't this too great an honour? I am a man of peace and have never worn a shield."

But the courtier fastened the little silver disk on his breast and said in amiable confidence: "Don't take it too literally, my friend. There are ten thousand Royal Shieldbearers in the country besides yourself, and you will never have to accompany the King in war. Besides, he is himself a man of peace and never takes part in battles."

This was quite a considerable relief. Jonah raised his head, tried to put on a proud look and said he would make it a point of honour to be a good shieldbearer. The old gentleman smiled kindly and called to the slaves, who conducted Jonah out of the palace, this time at a respectful distance, bustling before him and pausing every moment to make the prescribed obeisances to which a wearer

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of the King's robe of honour was entitled. Only they had difficulty in restraining their smiles when Jonah returned their bows. He had not yet learnt to receive these demonstrations with a cold and stony face, as a matter of course.

V

IT MUST have been a rather funny sight as Jonah left the shade of the palace and walked across the sunny fore-court to see the waiting litter—and the slaves bowed deeply and six men of the guard and their leader saluted with outstretched hands as if he were an Emperor—but the ridiculous thing was that he arrived barefoot in his robe of honour, which demanded a pair of bright red sandals. The slaves pretended not to notice. They drew aside the silken curtain of the litter and bade him climb in, which he did somewhat awkwardly, as it was the first time he had been in a litter.

The procession started at once for Nineveh with the usual noisy display, so far as this was possible for six men on foot. Jonah sat still behind the curtain entirely occupied with what had happened at the last moment, when a slave had come out and placed a heavy purse in his lap. He weighed it in his hand, trying to guess how many silver pieces it contained.

Inconceivable! he thought. The great turning-point in my life has arrived. I have achieved success!—of course he didn't know the word, but that was what he felt. It was too little to say that he had made his fortune—

he had success, and that is both something more and something less. Fortune is a fair wind that drives a ship towards its destination, but success is one of the rising waves of warm air that lift an airman to the greater altitudes and leave

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him to decide how he is to come down again. For success does not blow a man into port.

Jonah did not know this. Nor did he know the story of the Greek orator who was used to being hissed off and therefore asked his friends, one day when he had received unexpected applause: "Did I say something stupid?" Jonah simply sat hugging his purse of silver pieces and thinking: Now the new life begins—robe of honour—silver shield—money—a pass for the gates—that is success! And in a sudden access of religious emotion he said: "Oh, what an ass I was to doubt the Lord's guidance! To imagine he would leave me in the lurch. To think he was not rich enough to pay me for the trouble I have had. I offer thanks—thanks—thanks!" he said, bowing his head three times, while he was so confused that his thoughts were with the Lord and with the silver pieces at the same time in a kind of double consciousness. I am rich! he thought. I can do business. I can buy camels. And suddenly another idea came like a wet blanket: Only I shall have to get my prophetic work settled first. Well, that won't be so hard, when I have the Bodyguard to protect me.

He arranged the cushions comfortably: If only one didn't get so confoundedly tired of all this! There's something very trying about adventures, if one isn't an adventurer by nature. One's blood can't stand the sudden changes. (He meant his nerves, but they hadn't yet been discovered.) And then the uncertainty—the horrible fear of "light come, light go." Light come? he said bitterly; I think I've gone through more than most men. I need prosperity as a frozen man needs a fire at which to warm himself. "Thanks, Lord!" he said, looking up at the roof of the litter. "Now get me well out of this with money in my pocket."

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The man in charge of the guard knocked respectfully at the door of the litter. When Jonah drew the curtain aside he asked if he could be of any service. He called Jonah "Sir!" It sounded strange. He was the first man who had called Jonah anything like that. It was hard to find the right tone to

reply in. Jonah began diffidently by praising the litter. How comfortable it was! He hoped the slaves didn't find it too heavy for them?

"No, no," said the leader. "These animals are made for the work."

"You're right!" said Jonah. "I didn't mean that, of course. What I was going to say was—it's a lovely litter. I wish it was mine!"

"It is yours. The King never takes back what he gives to a subject."

"It's mine!" said Jonah, astonished. A litter that would fetch fifty pieces of silver at least! But he didn't say this aloud, he thought it. For he was still vulgar enough to look for the money value of everything. Aloud he said: "But what can one do with a litter if one has no slaves?"

"They're to be had in the market by the thousand—especially just now," said the man.

"But they cost money," Jonah objected.

"Well, but you're a rich man, sir! Every wearer of a robe of honour receives five thousand silver pieces a month from the King's Treasury."

Jonah was struck dumb. He clasped his hands under his robe and whispered: "Thanks, Lord, thanks! Now we're on the right road. So it is good business to be a prophet." But to the man walking alongside in the dust he said nothing, for he saw that a wall had now been raised between himself and those who lived from hand to mouth. This was not arrogance, it was caution. For he knew the

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predatory nature of these people. A man with five thousand pieces a month must keep the impecunious at a distance.

Five thousand! he said to himself. He felt inclined to ask the man if he had heard correctly. He couldn't have said five hundred? Five thousand! Why, it was a fortune—five thousand—Oh, thanks, Lord!—but where was one to hide so much money? How could one guard against being robbed—perhaps murdered? Oh, with five thousand one could afford to keep servants. And to pay for their loyalty—well, of course they mustn't have more than their due, or they'd get above their place. "Five thousand!" he said aloud, so that the man came back and asked if he wanted anything. No, no, it was nothing.

The litter swayed along, and at every motion there was a pleasant chinking in the leather bag, which filled Jonah with joy. Not that he was a miser, but a man who has been poor all his life can never be tired of listening to these silver bells, ringing in a new existence. It meant food, it meant power, honour and respect. Thoughts rushed in upon him from every side. He was like one intoxicated.

When they reached Nineveh the leader asked where they should carry their master. Jonah replied that he lived in the Jewish quarter—for the present, he added—with his friend Nahum. The leader knew him. Everybody in Nineveh seemed to know Nahum.

They carried him through the long avenues of palms in which he had wandered aimlessly during his first night in Nineveh, and here he was being gently rocked in his litter and saying to himself: If this is all a dream, it's a lovely one! But why wonder? The fantastic adventure had hold of him and carried him along like a fiery steed that had

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taken charge and would go on till it threw its rider.

The next time the litter halted, for a change of slaves, Jonah thought he would get out and stretch his legs. They had stopped in a little square beside a lofty wall, and in the wall was a door with a peep-hole through which Jonah looked.

He saw a garden which was like an oasis in the desert of houses. There were lawns like dark green velvet carpets, ornamented with great vases and figures of baked clay in many colours. The house stood in a grove of palms, secluded from the road, and before it was a fountain sending up a jet of water from the mouth of a fish which a boy held above his head.

Jonah remarked to the leader: "That's the sort of house one would like to have."

"Do you want it?" asked the man. "If so it's yours."

Jonah made a gesture, as though brushing away a too persistent fly. This was too much! His capacity for absorbing had already reached breaking-point. They'd be asking him next if he'd like to be King of Assyria.

"Our orders are to get you what you want," said the leader. "This house belongs to the King, and I suppose it's been lent to some official to live in."

"Then it's occupied," said Jonah.

"That doesn't matter. They'll have to clear out if the King wants it."

The Bodyguard set about their duty with customary brutality. They hammered at the door of the house, shouting to the inmates to open in the King's name. Frightened slaves tried to hold the door ajar, assuring the men that there must be a misunderstanding. But the door flew open when the warriors put their shoulders to it. They

asked who lived there, and the answer was that the house had been assigned to an old keeper of the records as his official residence.

"He'll have to move," said the leader. "The King gave him the house and the King takes it back. Fetch him!"

An old man came out bowing and asked what he could do to oblige.

The leader answered: "The King wants your house. This gentleman is to live here."

When the old man saw the silver shield and the robe of honour he bowed as low as he could and said: "I hear and obey! The slaves shall instantly pack my belongings."

Jonah stood aside, feeling ashamed. He was thinking: So this is Assyria. If it had happened in my country this man would have raised a howl and called the neighbours to witness that the King had robbed him. Here you heard no wailing, no cursing, no venting one's spleen. The old man just went quietly in, taking his household god under his arm and leaving the slaves to do the rest. There was not much furniture in an Assyrian house. And Jonah was a trifle uneasy, as he remembered the saying: Woe to him who maintains himself by robbery!

"I'm sorry for the old man," he said.

The leader replied with a blustering laugh that there wasn't a man in Nineveh who felt sorry for an official. They all had so many misdeeds on their conscience, and they were so ruthless when they got the chance, that they were universally hated. This humble old man would now go over to another house, inhabited by a man inferior to himself, and would drive him out—and the evicted man in his turn would drive another man out of another house, and so it would go on, till it came down to some poor devil who would have to pass the night under a tree.

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"Just you go down into the garden, sir, and make yourself at home," he said. "These people will soon clear out with their junk. You can see, they're already loading carpets and chests on the backs of the asses. Give me some money and I'll get in food, slaves and furniture, I know where things are to be bought cheap."

Ah, there we are, thought Jonah. Tins is where the difficulties begin. Naturally this rascal is going to make an income out of providing things I could buy cheaper myself, and I shan't even have the pleasure of striking a bargain in the market. But I've got to think of my position. He counted out a sum into the leader's hand and said: "What we *must* have, we *must*. But be careful. Don't buy of a Jew; go to a Babylonian for choice. They're easier to deal with. I don't mean that you're actually to best him, but there's no need to pay more than things are worth."

"Leave it to me, sir," said the leader with a cunning smile. "I know how to slit the nose-bag!"

VI

THE OWNER of the house had moved out, and Jonah went through the empty rooms wondering what use he could make of this superfluity of space. The people were gone, but they always leave something of themselves in a house they have lived in for years. Jonah's first task was to make the house his own. It was to be fumigated with juniper, to get rid of the foreign smell. There was something peculiar about these fish-eating and beer-drinking Assyrians that was irritating to a Jewish nose. It would be expensive to have this great house completely furnished

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with carpets, chests, cushions, pots and pans. Yes, there were complications in being made a great man so suddenly, he thought. There was a time when he required nothing but a sheepskin for the cold nights.

He went out into the garden—his garden—and saw that it was a real paradise. There were shady walks, grottoes, white peacocks, doves with a metallic sheen on their wings, a pond with goldfish and two black swans with red beaks. They came rushing towards him, making him retreat in terror; but they meant no harm, they only thought they were going to be fed. From a branch a forgotten coloured lantern still hung, left from an entertainment tire others had given in the garden. Of course! Jonah would have to do the same. It was expected of persons of rank.

But now a strange thing has to be told. In the midst of his joy he was not really happy. All these surroundings did not quite suit him: something was wanting. He ought to have reposed in his good fortune, his soul ought to have been like a calm lake in which all these glories were reflected, and his heart should have been full of gratitude. But it was his inborn failing to be able to detect a fault everywhere. He had been plumped down into a

paradise, but the Garden of Eden is not complete without an Eve. It was her he missed.

Curiously enough the leader of the Guard had seen this at once. He was of peasant stock and his native sagacity enabled him to put his finger on the spot. He had said: "You will want a wife here. Shall I buy you one?"

"No, thanks," Jonah had answered. It shocked him to be taken for one of the animals for which one buys a wife, as one buys a hen for breeding fowls. It was another of Jonah's eccentricities—in the view of his contemporaries—to

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take love so seriously. Others called it sentimental nonsense when the poets sang of girls with faces like the full moon and eyes that were deep and black as a starless sky at night. One's chief reason for taking a wife was that she should bear children and keep the female slaves in order; unless indeed one was so poor that she had to draw the plough herself. But the new thing about Jonah was that he believed in love—even beyond the honeymoon. This made him exacting. He was not content with a woman who would merely share his happiness—there were plenty of them—he required one who would also share his troubles; and nobody does that except from love of the person with whom they are shared. He thought he had seen something in Sarah's eyes which he interpreted as a promise in this direction. Therefore it was to be she or nobody.

But then, as he stood here by the marble border of the pond, gazing thoughtfully at the goldfish, the Voice announced itself, like a foreign station breaking in on a broadcast, and it said: "Consider well, Jonah! What do you want with a wife? Your prophetic calling is enough for you."

"That's just what I was expecting," said Jonah bitterly. "At last I have achieved" (yes, he had the audacity to say achieved!) "money, respect and a fine house—and now my joy is to be ruined. Can it be called wrong of me to wish to share my happiness with another?"

The Voice replied in a tone of friendly persuasion, as though dealing with a child: "Did we not agree that the main thing was the advancement of the Work?"

"And am I not a part of the Work?" said Jonah. "I am now five-and-thirty, an age at which other people have children nearly grown up, and am I not allowed to marry?"

"Rejoice in all the beautiful things I have given you!" said the Voice.

But Jonah could not rejoice. What signified his house, his garden, peacocks, swans—even his money and his robe of honour—if he was to lead a lonely life with a void in his heart? Then he might just as well be one of the prophets that are thirteen to the dozen, the ones with a cloak of camel's hair and a face like an unclipped poodle.

No, he said to himself, I'll show that I too have a will!

The Voice, that read his thoughts as if they were printed on his forehead, said in a fatherly but serious manner: "Think of what you are doing, Jonah! You have found out before now that my wrath can track you down if need be."

But Jonah was a different man since he had come into money and a robe of honour. He was no longer the cowed little Jew, he was a person of rank and felt entitled to carry his head as high as any power in existence. He said therefore: "I have fulfilled *my* part of the agreement. The message has been brought to Nineveh. So why am I to be made a slave? There must be justice for me, as for any other man?"

It is possible that the Lord smiled at seeing this ant getting on its hind legs. For Jonah is the first modern man recorded in the Bible. He was the first to understand that there is no need to prostrate oneself before the face of God as one has to do before a little King of Assyria—a puffed-up creature of artificial dignity that requires an artificial beard.

But at the same time Jonah had an inkling that with all his insignificance he was in a mysterious way indispensable to the system. The Lord must have a reason for not showing himself in the clouds and dictating his will to Nineveh in person. And it must be the same reason

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which made the Lord pick out the little cake-seller from Tyre from the whole multitudinous creation.

It was this inkling that made the little man hold his head high—while everyone else crept and wriggled up to the Lord's throne—made him walk erect with an air of frankness that even archangels dared not assume. For what is an archangel—with flaming sword and all the rest of it—other than a doorkeeper? But Jonah felt that in a mystical way he belonged to the family. Angels, planets, demons, animals and plants were God's creatures of the second grade, so to speak, but Jonah—for all his refractoriness—was

a child of God, and he was going to see if the Lord would have the strength to tear him out of his heart.

It is possible that the Lord had no objection to this young cockerel lifting up his head and saying: I will defend what is mine—my property and my love. I have wandered far, I have suffered beatings, I have gone hungry for the sake of the good cause—and even to-morrow I am going out to proclaim to Nineveh the Lord's will. Am I not worthy of my hire? We'll see about that!

The Voice preserved a diplomatic silence, and Jonah had other things to think about, as the leader returned with a whole company of slaves, male and female, laden with food and furniture. He handed Jonah the empty purse and said: "It was just enough, but now your house is supplied for the time being."

"Thanks," said Jonah rather coolly, promising himself that when he felt a little firmer in the saddle he wouldn't have accounts kept in this fashion.

He looked at the slaves, who were drawn up in a row. Most of them had black blood in them, but their animal faces were inoffensive, and if they were not overworked

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and were allowed a little tactful peculation they would be faithful and devoted—unless some catastrophe occurred to convulse society, in which case they would be the first to fall upon him and cut his throat. That is one of the inconveniences of slave-holding.

They were standing under a big tree, scratching the dust with their bare toes like bashful schoolchildren.

"You must say something to them," said the leader.

Jonah went forward and spoke. He exhorted them to be diligent and submissive, and they listened to him with drooping heads and sheepish deference, but inwardly they were thinking: Does he imagine we haven't heard this sort of talk before?

Imperceptibly Jonah found the correct tone of kindly condescension. It was the first time he had had a chance of laying down the law, and in his blissful innocence he had often said to himself that if he ever had slaves he would be good to them. To be sure, those who had tried this said it was dangerous, but Jonah wished to make the experiment. And the slaves grew bold and signified their approval, till the leader checked their exhilaration, shouting; "Stop your noise! Nobody cares what you like or don't like. Your

master may have been an under-dog himself, but now he's the one that gives orders and you have only to obey."

Jonah decided to initiate his new human material by a visit to Nahum's house. The litter was brought out, he took his seat in it and said: "Well, my dear friends, suppose we avail ourselves of this fine evening for a little outing. Be so kind as to carry me to Nahum's house."

The slaves smiled, showing big white teeth in their black faces; they were happy to have found so pleasant a master. They galloped off with him, prompting him to

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acknowledge the truth of the old saying that new brooms sweep clean—so long as they last.

He had also to admit that, seen from a litter, Nineveh looked very different from what it seemed to a wanderer on foot who had to squeeze against the wall to let his betters go by. Jonah thought there was something uncommonly friendly about the city. He passed through the same market-place where he got a rotten watermelon in the face, but bless me, he thought, it was only meant as a joke, and we must excuse common people if their jokes are a little coarse.

## VII

THE SLAVES set down the litter outside Nahum's house. They banged at the gate with the force and the contempt for the peace of the neighbourhood which in Nineveh were a token of superiority in visiting one of lower rank.

Jonah got out. As far as he was capable of more astonishment that day it surprised him that Nahum's house now appeared so modest. Of course it was quite a nice house, but it lacked the air of nobility that marked his own. As he entered the fore-court the slaves bowed to the ground before his robe of honour. They gave themselves no time to see that the man inside was Jonah.

In the house itself Nahum came to meet him with out-stretched arms, crying: "Blessed be he on whom God has shed the light of his countenance!"—whether he was thinking of the Lord or of Sargon, among whose titles was this: the God descended upon earth.

Jonah embraced him, kissing both his bewhiskered cheeks, and said modestly: "Friend and benefactor, without

you I were but a withered leaf, the plaything of the winds. Marvellous things have befallen me!"

"We know all about it," said Nahum mysteriously.

Now Nahum had had a visit from a remarkable man whose name was Pilo. He was president of the guild of five hundred story-tellers who sat at street comers in Nineveh and collected people around them as they told the tale of the fisherman's wife who wanted to be like the judge, then like the king, and finally like the sun-god himself—or the story of Sin-Bad the seafarer—or the thrilling detective story of the sheik who could see by the camel's footprints that it was one-eyed, had a tooth missing in its upper jaw and belonged to a merchant who was lame of one leg.

These reciters assembled every morning in Pile's courtyard and had the day's tales distributed among them, so that they might not all be telling the same story. But as a call to the passers-by they used little items of news, which they announced in the abbreviated form of newspaper headlines—some of them in solemn intonation, as when they said: "The jealous gods pour out their vials of wrath upon the black land!" others, whose station was in the popular quarters, roared out the same piece of news: "Shocking bad times in Egypt! There's not enough water in the Nile to wet a fly's feet!"

"You must make the acquaintance of this extraordinary man," said Nahum. "I do business with him. He is shrewd and almost omniscient."

At this moment Leah and Sarah appeared and clapped their hands and admired Jonah in his robe of honour and touched his silver shield with the tips of their fingers and quoted texts in praise of the Lord's goodness and the fortune that had brought this man to their house.

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"Friends!" said Jonah, pressing their hands, "I am the same as before. Greatness has not gone to my head. And yet I have been exalted higher than you can imagine. I will tell you all about it."

They went out into the court under the striped awning, where sat the omniscient Pilo, a fat little beardless man with ugly sawn-off teeth and a smile like a hyena when it raises one corner of its mouth—a curiously lazy man who merely waved a hand slackly and said: "Ah, here we have Jonah"—as if he had known him all his life. "You have a future before you,

my friend. The favour of kings is a whirlwind that can carry a tomtit up to the seventh heaven."

Jonah felt hurt by this freedom of speech—not so much on his own account, but after all he was a Royal Shieldbearer and not hail-fellow with anybody you please. He tried to look chilly. Pilo was not impressed; he said: "Sit down, friend Jonah," as though he were the master of the house. "We know what has happened, I may tell you. Samsin has long been thinking of putting a brake on these pushful priests, and now he's discovered that you can be of some use."

Jonah felt a violent dislike for this impudent person who spoke disrespectfully of his promotion. He turned to Nahum and the women and told them his experiences, but this did not prevent the disagreeable man from interrupting the conversation every moment with his disparaging remarks.

"In any case," said Jonah, "I am now the owner of one of the finest houses in the city, I have an income of five thousand silver pieces a month, and the King has honoured me with the Silver Shield. I must have some importance, presumably."

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"Why yes," said Nahum; "you've got on like the boy in the fairy-tale—him with the copper lamp. What was his name?"

"Illu-id-din," said Pilo indulgently. "But now let our honoured friend tell us something of his plans. Perhaps it might provide material for my five hundred reciters."

He made himself comfortable among the cushions and crossed his arms like a man who expects to hear something interesting, but before Jonah began he said in a whisper to Leah: "You forget your guests, my dear lady. Don't we get something to drink?" That was the way with this person; he made himself at home everywhere. His face showed no sign when Leah bridled with annoyance as she went out, or when Nahum obviously disliked his superior treatment of Jonah.

"You must understand," said Nahum, "that Jonah is a real prophet. Everything he says comes from above."

"I am but a flute which emits sound when the breath of the Lord stirs within me," said Jonah solemnly.

"Of course, of course!" said Pilo. "All the prophets say that." And he gave Jonah a roguish look, as much as to say: We two rascals understand

one another—"And what is the Lord in the habit of saying when he speaks through you?"

"He usually condemns the frivolous life of Nineveh," said Jonah with dignity.

"The same old song," said Pilo. "Which god is it, by the way? Shamash, I'll be bound."

"No," said Jonah. "It is Adonai—my Lord—the Lord of all the World!"

"Ah, the Jew god," said Pilo, who seemed to have not the slightest respect for this foreign deity. "Yes, it's like him to be strait-laced. But his prophecies never come to

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anything. No, if we're to go to foreigners, the Greeks are the ones who have a future before them. Their gods are well-bred and amusing. But as long as you wear that costume you've got on, Nineveh will believe what you say, even if you tell people the man in the moon is a Nubian ape. You have now a couple of weeks to work in. Make the most of them."

"Why only a couple of weeks?" asked Jonah.

"That's about the average lifetime of a prophet here in Nineveh. Last year there was one from Babylon who was much ran after, till he was prosecuted for corrupting the people's morals and put to death in boiling pitch. Then another one arrived—a regular prodigy of rags and filth—he came from the mountains and turned people's heads by telling them they ought to worship Truth. He was thrown to the lions. But as a rule the hearers themselves make short work of the prophets. That is, if they don't disappear before it comes to that. There is a moment when those who have a keen scent can tell that the wind's about to change. I'll give you a hint when that time comes."

Evidently the fat little man with the nasty grin could see nothing in Jonah but a little Jew of the kind that generally ran round selling sandal-laces. This irritated Jonah. It also irritated Sarah, who was already in a nervous state from mingled joy and sadness; joyful because of her pride in Jonah, and sad because she thought he was slipping away from her, now that he had become a distinguished person. Of course she could say nothing here in the presence of men, so she had to be content with showing she was offended. She rose and went out into the garden.

Soon after Jonah followed her. There was something he wanted to say, though he knew very well it was improper

to speak of love to a young woman before one had arranged matters with her parents. When he overtook her he opened the conversation very mildly by talking of the weather, how close it had been to-day; but he did it in such a tone that every word seemed like a caress. This is an art that only lovers understand. No one can explain how it is done.

The sun was about to set and the moment had arrived when the people of Nineveh began to feel relief. The first cool gusts stirred in the tree-tops. But it was also the time when they began to perspire freely until the dew came. Jonah took off his robe of honour and carried it over his arm, and they walked side by side, saying nothing, but nevertheless wrapt in the complete community of thought which always exists between those who are really in love, and which is infinitely more poetical than the lyrical pukings the poets make them say to one another.

She felt at a corner of the robe and said she would never have believed any silk could be so thick—and what colours—

"But look here!" he said, showing another part of the embroidery.

As he did so their hands met, and it was like an electric short circuit. The spark of passion flashed, they fell on each other's necks, and Jonah said he loved her. Sarah said she loved him, and they stood for a moment embracing in all innocence as if nothing could part them—and it was a wonderful moment, for they were pure and their only wish was to make each other happy.

It grew dark. All the flowers gave out a heavy scent and rank vapours rose from the soil. The stars came out. The couple still stood clinging to one another, as if they were mortally afraid of being parted.

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Then Leah called to Sarah: "Where are you?"

Sarah tried to free herself, but Jonah held her hand: "I will speak to your father this very evening," he said.

She fled in the most charming confusion, but looked back as she did so, and there was such love in her great warm eyes that Jonah was utterly unable to comprehend that anyone could be so fond of him. He swore a silent oath that no power in heaven or earth should part him from her. He had heard the ancients say that Love conquers all, and he felt that life would be meaningless if the God, whom all hoped to be good, should

refuse to allow the union of two sincere lovers. Such a course must be left to the shortsightedness of men.

## VIII

WHEN JONAH returned to the house Pilo had gone. Nahum sat sipping a cup of wine, and Leah stood behind him with an evident air of expectation, as though she knew what was coming. No doubt she had seen long ago how things were going between Jonah and Sarah.

Jonah took a seat beside Nahum and they talked again of Jonah's great good fortune in being taken under the King's wing.

"You said you would be happy if you owned two camels," Nahum teased him good-naturedly. "Now you will soon be able to buy whole caravans. So I suppose you are happy?"

"I should be as the scum of the earth if I were not," replied Jonah; "and yet I have still one desire."

Even as he said it he realized that he was going too fast. It was as though the Voice whispered: "Jonah, Jonah! Remember your calling!" But now it was too late to stop,

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as Nahum turned a look of inquiry on him.

"I should like to share my good fortune with you," said Jonah.

Nahum was taken by surprise. His rude masculine wit had entirely failed to see that there was an understanding between Jonah and Sarah. He only wondered what Jonah could be driving at. Was he going to offer them money?

"We lack nothing," he said. "We have your friendship, we ask nothing more."

"Perhaps there is something we can do for Jonah," said Leah meaningly.

Jonah saw that she was on his side. He said to Nahum: "My wish is a bold one. Give me your daughter to wife. Make me your son."

Nahum was quite overwhelmed. He saw at once what it would mean to have a Royal Shieldbearer for a son-in-law; besides which, he had got to like Jonah, so the offer delighted him. Only he refrained from showing it out of pride, and because a marriage was something of a business transaction.

"That is a serious matter," he said slowly. "It must be carefully considered. Sarah is the apple of my eye, and my house will be empty if you take her from me. We must also reflect that you are a prophet, and we have already seen that this is liable to cause sudden vicissitudes in a man's life. Remember what Pilo told you about the other prophets."

"It can't be so bad as that when Jonah has the Lord with him," put in Leah.

This was a smack in the face for Jonah, as he knew the Lord was against him on this very point, and he had learnt that the Lord could hit hard when he was angry. For a moment he was so silent and pensive that Nahum was

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afraid he regretted the words he had just spoken.

"However," Nahum hastened to say, "I could not imagine a better son, and if anything should happen to make the King change his mind about you, I have friends well able to protect you."

"I am sure Jonah would make a good husband for Sarah," said Leah.

"Then let it be so," said Nahum. He was about to give Jonah his hand, but Leah stopped him.

"We must first tell Jonah about your business," she said. "He must know what he is going into. Perhaps it is not fitting for a holy man to become the son-in-law of one who is known as the desert robber."

Desert robber? Jonah looked from one to the other. It was not the first time he had heard these words in connection with Nahum, but he had always thought there must be some confusion with another man of the same name. Of course he hadn't yet discovered what Nahum's business was, but one could hardly live in the Middle of Nineveh and be a desert robber.

Nahum's face had turned serious. It could be seen that he was not pleased at what Leah had said, but she was right: for a holy man it was a questionable matter to marry into a family engaged in so worldly a profession.

"My dear Jonah," he said; "since Leah has told you I may as well admit it—I am the man who is known in Nineveh as Nahum the desert robber. But as you see that I live in peace and prosperity and that nobody hurts a hair of my head, you can understand that I can't be just an ordinary robber—and yet I cannot renounce the name."

Jonah remembered what his father had often said: He who frequents the company of evil men is like a man who plays with pitch. He cannot avoid

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Where Jonah came from the desert robbers were the most hated of men. They were looked upon as heartless vultures lying in wait for defenceless travellers who already had dangers enough to contend with in the sand of the desert and the heat of the sun.

As he looked at his host and benefactor it seemed to him that the hooked nose grew into the beak of a bird of prey, the gleam of the deep-set little eyes became pitiless, as did the cruel, full-blooded lips which showed red against the black beard streaked with silver.

"It would grieve me if you were a bad man," he said. "To me in any case you have been good."

Nahum said: "You have told me of the events of your life; now I will tell you of *mine*."

The story began at home in the old country, where Nahum, who was the child of poor parents, had to herd the sheep of the rich usurer as part payment of their debt. One day a mountain lion ate one of the sheep, and the boy, knowing he would be flogged without mercy if he came home without the sheep, ran away. But not, as boys generally do, to sea. He went out into the desert.

In this ocean of sand there are islands on which a ship-wrecked man can be thrown up to begin a new life, if he is lucky. Nahum came to one of these oases and was adopted by a tribe of Beduins, who taught him the trade of a robber—the noble trade, they called it, the only one worthy of a free man.

At that time, when it was rare to meet merchant ships at sea, the ships of the desert—the camels—rocked across the sand in endless chains, carrying burdens from India, from Africa, even from distant China. And as the skipper at sea had to be prepared to encounter pirates, so had the leader of a caravan to contend with the pirates of the

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desert, who waged war on all and thought they had as good a right to levy tribute as the King to levy taxes.

Not that there were no such things as law and justice in those days, but they could only be enforced within the boundaries of civilized communities. At sea, in the mountains and in the desert the law of the sword prevailed. Nahum succeeded in gaining the respect of these people by his strength, his courage and the business sense which these children of nature lacked.

One day he got up in their assembly and made a proposal which must have impressed them in the same way as the Spanish courtiers were impressed when Columbus made the egg stand upright.

Nahum said to them: "You must have noticed that these townsmen arc crafty. It often happens that we lie in wait for a trumpery little caravan while they send rich cargoes behind our backs by a circuitous route. What you want is a trustworthy man living in a big city who could watch what is going on at the starting-place of the caravans and keep you informed, so that you would always know which caravans were worth the trouble of pursuing, if there were several to choose from."

"Thus it came about," said Nahum, "that I settled in Nineveh as the desert robbers' spy. As a blind I carried on a modest little merchant's business, while keeping my people informed of the movements of the caravans. But the pitcher may go too often to the well, and one day I was imprisoned, convicted by many witnesses, and sentenced to be flayed alive, stuffed with straw and nailed to the gate of the caravan field, as they hang a shot hawk on a pole in a poultry yard."

At night, as Nahum lay in his prison, kept awake by rats, vermin and heat, he had another good idea. When

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morning came he asked to be taken before the judge, as he wished to reveal secret matters which his conscience would not allow him to take with him into the realm of the dead.

When he was alone with the mighty man, he said: "Most noble judge! Even if a hundred stuffed human skins were to hang at the gates of Nineveh, the Beduins would not cease from attacking the caravans. Their nature is as that of the lion, roaring after prey. This is known to the leader of the caravan, who must therefore take with him on every journey a score of men whose only task is to take up arms when the Beduins appear; and yet it often happens that the defenders are not strong enough and take to flight, if indeed they do not go over to the enemy. It would be cheaper and more convenient if the caravans were to arrange matters in advance with the tribes, whereby they would know that they could pass freely. I know these people, and if the caravan leaders are willing to pay a toll, I will

divide it into three shares; the tribes shall have one share, for which they will leave the caravan in peace; I take the second—"

Here the judge interrupted, saying this was absolutely illegal.

Nahum continued: "Hear first how the third share is to be disposed of. It falls to you, great judge, in gratitude for your wisdom in rising superior to the dead letter of the law and bestowing peace and good order on the country."

The judge's interest was suddenly awakened, and on hearing what a substantial sum was involved he realized at once that the proposal was a good one. Thus did Nahum not only escape being stuffed, but was established as an important person who issued passports to the caravan leaders who were bound for the desert. He settled afterwards

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with the chiefs of the tribes, and they were glad to be paid in silver pieces instead of having to pay themselves in purple-dyed wool or carpets or cinnamon or incense, for which they had no use.

Now one would have thought that Nahum was hated and despised in Nineveh and regarded as Public Enemy Number One—but on the contrary, he was admired for his shrewdness and the merchants themselves were glad of the arrangement. They now knew exactly what it cost to pass through the desert with a whole skin, and they could raise the price of their goods by so much. As usual, it was the consumer who had to pay.

But what did the prophet think of this? His first impression was not far short of envy, since he himself had never had such happy thoughts. This was a stroke of genius, like that of the man of Tyre who made a fortune out of sending dead fish to Jerusalem. But looking at the matter from the Lord's point of view, it took on a different aspect. Robbery is robbery, and the receiver is no better than the thief. Jonah had many proofs that the Lord's ideas about business were markedly at variance with his own. And as the Lord had already warned him against his marriage, it did not improve matters that Nahum had this odd way of making his living.

Jonah also wished to know what use Nahum made of the men he had seen exercising themselves in the use of arms in the garden. Nahum had no difficulty in explaining. The desert tribes often found it hard to understand the value of agreements. It sometimes happened that nature got the better of discipline and that they attacked a caravan which had paid the toll. Then

Nahum had to march out and take a bloody revenge. He was like the Canadian police, who pursue a murderer to the end of the world in

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order that justice may receive its due. For the whole of Nahum's business rested on the supposition that the tribes should respect his passport. He was thus not only the trusted agent of the robbers, but also in a way a pioneer of the principles of civilization.

"It is perhaps for this reason," he said piously, "that it has pleased the Lord to make me a rich man; but my money has not been earned without effort. I have to work hard even to-day. When folks call me Nahum the Desert Robber I take it as an honourable title and reply with a play upon words" (which cannot be reproduced here, as it postulates a knowledge of Assyrian) "not Nahum the Desert Robber, but Nahum the Righteous! You merely have to change a couple of letters."

Yes, such is life, thought Jonah. You just have to change a couple of letters—and do it in the right way—and you're over on the right side of the boundary line. He could not see that there was anything wrong in doing business in Nahum's way. People got something for their money—they travelled safely with Nahum's recommendation—they avoided risks and bloodshed. But then it struck him: What becomes of those who refuse to pay the toll? And he passed on the question.

Nahum paused, stroking his beard and clearing his throat before speaking. This was a question of conscience addressed to Nahum the Righteous. The answer had to be well considered.

"Well, you see, my friend," he said; "there is nothing to do but leave that caravan to its fate. But lest my friends should think I had put money in my own pocket, I am obliged to inform them that there is a caravan on the road which refuses to pay."

Jonah asked no more. He could be pretty sure that

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caravan would have no pleasant journey, but as he loved Sarah he gave Nahum his hand nevertheless, saying: "I am glad to receive confirmation that you are a man of honour. Possibly it is rather hard on the caravans that don't pay, but on the other hand those who don't pay their taxes are not treated very lightly either."

"Just so!" said Nahum. "It costs a lot of money to insure the safety of travellers, and I think it's mean of people to try to shirk their share of the expense, so really I don't feel any pity for them."

Thus Jonah easily got over the awkward fact that his future father-in-law derived his wealth from turbid and bloody sources. Lawyers and theologians might have spent hours discussing the question, but men who have a business sense arc usually tolerant.

"I can't see," said Jonah, "that what you have been telling me can place any obstacle in the way of my love for your daughter."

"Then take her—and be happy!"

"Thanks," said Jonah. "You repose great confidence in me, and I shall show myself worthy of it. As regards Sarah, I am certain that she loves me."

But Leah would not hear a word of this. She declared that Sarah was an honest girl who loved no man till she was sure she was to be his wife.

"But love is a thing one cannot control," objected Jonah.

"Love is nothing but heathen nonsense," said Leah.

Jonah knew better what love was, but, like many lovers before and after him, he consoled himself with the thought that it was the daughter and not the mother he was to marry.

Then there was the financial side of the question. One

does not get a bride for nothing. Not that Nahum had any objection to giving him Sarah, but good tone demanded that she should be bought. She would have been in despair had Jonah subjected her to the disgrace of getting her for nothing, as though she were a worthless object.

Now Leah had to pass to the other side of the curtain, as it was unseemly for a woman to be present when men were discussing business. Then the two began to bargain, transformed at once into a pair of poker players trying to bluff each other. Nahum demanded five hundred pieces of silver. Jonah wouldn't give that. He was not far from saying straight out that Sarah wasn't worth so much.

Of course Nahum got angry, but no more seriously than a horsedealer who affects to be huffed at a buyer's finding fault with his animal. He was well aware it was all pretence, as he swore by the beards of his ancestors that he would rather see his daughter dead at his feet than let her go for less than four hundred and fifty silver pieces. Jonah remarked with a scornful laugh that one could buy even gold too dearly.

Behind the curtain Sarah and Leah stood listening. They were just as keen as the men, for they had the same commercial blood in them. Though Sarah thought she would give her life for Jonah, she had no idea at the moment of selling herself for less than her due. Fancy suggesting that she wasn't worth at least four hundred silver pieces!

Then Jonah said magnanimously: "Friend Nahum! I will pay three hundred and fifty silver pieces for Sarah, and I will present a hundred and fifty to Leah on the wedding-day. Is it a bargain?"

Nahum smiled and gave his hand on it. He was getting

the right sort of son-in-law—a man who showed he could strike a bargain, but at the same time could be generous as befitted a great man.

"Sarah is yours!" he said. "Now we have only to ask an astrologer which is the most propitious day for the wedding."

And though Jonah, as a prophet, knew very well it was forbidden to have any dealings with such people, he thought the proposal quite a sensible one. Besides which, one could count on the astrologers knowing that young people were disposed to reckon a day propitious if it was not too far off.

The slaves carried Jonah home by torchlight, and as he sat swaying in the litter a dread crept over him, like the dampness of a cold night. He was prepared for a thundering denunciation from the Voice, for having bound himself to a woman, and worse still, one whose father was an accomplice of robbers. But the Voice was silent. Jonah had a strange feeling that something within him was dead, like a telephone the wire of which was broken. And he knew this augured no good.

The slaves who carried him sang light-heartedly—the same strophe over and over again, after the manner of Orientals. Their bare feet splashed in the puddles left by the shower which at this season fell every evening, and they kicked at the water gaily. Jonah envied the irresponsible way in which they rolled through existence.

But when he reached home and saw his beautiful house in the moonlight and thought it was like one of the fairy palaces built by the spirits, his courage rose and he thought: In any case the Lord has no power over the King of Assyria, he cannot take away my robe of honour or my money. And besides, my conscience is clear, for has not the Lord himself said that it is not good for man to be alone?

The young slave girl who received him may have thought the same, as she gave him a sly smile and preceded him into the house with the dim oil lamp. He had no eyes for her swarthy charms and ordered her to put the lamp on the floor and go.

## IX

THE ROOM in which he was to sleep was large, lofty and decorated with a many-coloured frieze. When he was alone he took the lamp and went round the walls looking at the paintings. They represented men with curly beards and stern faces. They were fighting with lions or torturing their enemies, and Jonah thought it must call for a curious taste to delight in these pictures, which would have been more at home in a chamber of horrors.

It was another new thing about Jonah, this dislike of bloodshed. The hideous pictures put him in a bad humour. As he stood in the middle of the room with the oil lamp, whose wan little flame flared or shrank as it caught the draught, he realized that he was afraid of his spacious surroundings, since all his life he had been accustomed to rooms that fitted him as the cell in a beehive fits a pupa. In the darkness the walls receded and the ceiling rose, making the room look larger than it was, and the corners, where the light could not penetrate, were made gloomier.

Assyrian houses were entirely open. The rooms were only divided by curtains, and anyone could easily steal in from the garden and reach his couch without his knowing it until possibly the knife was in him.

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But it had been the same in Gath, in Tyre, on his wanderings through the mountains, where he passed the night in the woods, or when he slept in the street in Nineveh. Only there was this difference—he was now a rich man, a prize! It sometimes happened that slaves plotted together and murdered their master at night. The thieves of Nineveh were also renowned for their boldness. How was it possible to sleep calmly in an evil world unless before going to rest one could prostrate oneself on the carpet and with bowed head call upon the Lord of all good spirits? This Jonah had done in

the mountains and on the first night he passed in the street among the ten thousand homeless human jackals; it had always given him a sense of security.

But this evening he dared not address himself to the Lord for fear of attracting attention to himself. It is foolish to wake a sleeping lion, and possibly the Lord had more important matters on hand and had failed to notice that in spite of his prohibition Jonah had taken steps to get married. Although Jonah, without entirely understanding it, had made an immense step in the direction of a new conception of the relation between the Lord and himself, he had not got beyond imagining the Lord as a tribal chief with a black beard, prosperous and usually in a good humour when the world was going as it ought, but extremely busy keeping in check all the people he had under him. Heaven too was doubtless a pretty extensive affair with distant provinces, and if the Lord had not yet announced himself it was perhaps because he had something to attend to beyond the sun and the other heavenly bodies.

Jonah undressed, locked the robe of honour and the silver shield in the chest where he kept his silver pieces, lay down on his couch, blew out the lamp and felt at home

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when the wick gave off a smoky smell of oil. Then he drew the coverlet over him and prepared to sleep.

Outside in the great walnut-tree before the house a bird had settled and chattered a great part of the night in a tone of scornful laughter. Was it a lover's complaint or ironical contempt of things in general? It made cunning pauses, when Jonah was on the point of falling asleep; but the moment he was slipping into the deep soft waters of sleep it started a new series of clucks and gulps and he was wide awake again.

He tried to think of cheerful things. Soon the house would have a mistress and he would no longer have to sleep by himself. Of course a wife was not so trusty as a watchdog, but still young women slept lighter than men. In the daytime too it would be fine to have her about. For many years he had wanted someone to confide in; that was why his thoughts were often secretive, acidulated and trite. One must speak one's mind occasionally.

And then there was the money. He counted on his fingers under the bedclothes how much he could put by, say in three months, if his grandeur

lasted as long as that. The ugly man with the five hundred story-tellers had given him a scare.

Suddenly he thought there was something moving stealthily about him. He listened with bated breath—it was only the woodwork shrinking as the night grew cool—but it annoyed him to have to admit to himself that he was a coward—for he was one—and how foolish of a man like him to fall out with the mightiest of the mighty!

"O God!" he said aloud; "forgive me if what I have done is wrong. Wiry have I been given a heart if I may not follow its promptings?"

He lay artfully listening and thought to himself: Now's

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the time if the Voice intends to speak. Outside the bird chattered mischievously and the woodwork creaked again, but from above nothing came.

Except the moon, which shone through a window high up under the ceiling. It sent a rectangular beam across to the opposite wall, like the light of a dark lantern. It chanced to fall on one of the unpleasant pictures, in which one bearded man was running his sword through another bearded man. Jonah closed his eyes.

Soon after he had to get up and take the blankets and cushions off his couch. It was far too soft for him. He sank too deep in the pillows and was in a sweat. Then he lay down on the bare wooden pallet with a single blanket over him—just as he had lain in his little room in Old Tyre. That was better. In one of the bird's rests he was lucky enough to fall asleep, and slept on till it was daylight and the slave girl stood by his couch with a dish of dates and figs and asked if he would take sheep's milk with them. He answered gruffly that he would get up and dress before eating. He had not yet adopted the genteel habit of taking breakfast in bed.

And now all curtains were drawn, so that he could see straight into the garden, where the peacocks were already stalking about, screaming with the joy of life. He washed, anointed his hair with a costly ointment, and sniffed with enjoyment the rare perfume which clung to him. He had a new undergarment too; what can one not get for money! And the robe of honour was taken out of the chest.

As he put it on—stiff and heavy and uncomfortable as it was—he found that dignity came with it. For the first time in his life he wore shoes on his

feet. They were bright red and were laced high up the ankle. It was frightfully uncomfortable and all his ten toes protested

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mutely in their pain; but these shoes were the real mark of distinction. Even Nahum went barefoot in the house, and when he went out he wore ordinary shuffling sandals, like bath slippers.

When Jonah left the house the slaves greeted him with clapping of hands and noisy shouts: "Here is our master! See how splendid he is! Praised be the gods who have given us so gracious and noble a master!" They bowed before him, and he felt awkward, not knowing whether to return their bows. He contented himself with smiling, and his smiles were sincere, for his spirits had risen with the daylight. And like the King he began to ask himself whether there was not something imposing about him after all, since the slaves made such a fuss of him.

The leader of the Guard appeared, gleaming with bright cuirass and polished leather. The six soldiers came out and marched round the court cracking their leather whips, like circus directors showing off in the ring. The litter was brought forward and Jonah got in, saying: "Today I will speak in the square before the temple of Shamash."

As they went off with him he was by no means happy at having to go out and prophesy, even under the protection of the Guard and with all the importance accorded by his robe of honour. He would rather have stayed at home in his fine house indulging in thoughts of love. He was like a needy writer who had great plans in his head, but had lost much of his keenness since receiving an advance from his publisher. And how can one feel in the humour for denouncing the iniquities of the age when one is perfectly satisfied with existence?

When they arrived before the temple of Shamash 226

Jonah had himself hoisted on to the roof of the litter and clapped his hands above the empty square so that he could be heard by those who were prowling in the shade of the walls. The Ninevites were an inquisitive people and a crowd soon collected. He could see by the faces staring up at him that they were full of expectation. It was the first time they had seen a well-dressed prophet—more than that, a man of rank and of such distinction as to be protected by the Royal Bodyguard.

And there he stood before all the people in his gaudy robe and his red shoes, crying: "Hallo, hallo, ye men and women of Nineveh! Come and hear what my Lord has to say to you through the mouth of his servant!"

But then he came to a stop. His confusion was obvious. He missed the all-important connection from on high. The spirit would not descend upon him. He experienced the feelings of an actor with faulty memory when he discovers to his horror that the prompter is not in his box. In his inmost heart he called upon the Lord: "Behold, here I stand bringing disgrace upon your name," he said. "For pity's sake help me!" But the Voice was silent.

The people in the square were growing impatient, and Jonah felt what clergymen sometimes suffer on the days when they wish they were dead and buried instead of standing in the pulpit. He would have to try to preach out of his own head. The sentences came haltingly and there was no power in them, though he used big words and flung himself about with prophetic gestures. There was a strange cleavage in his mind. Even as he spoke he took in trifling incidents in the square before him—a dog wandering about —an old woman with a wrinkled face who stared up at him—so there was something that

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spoke within him; but it was not the Lord, it was the little twopenny god, Routine—the one who makes a great noise with his tub-thumping, but who does not work miracles. His words flutter away over people's heads like a whirring covey of partridges; they do not rise into the air like proud swans.

The more Jonah become aware of his own impotence, the louder he shouted. He roared like a bull: "Woe to Nineveh! Woe to those who go in purple and fine raiment! Woe to those who live by robbery!" He was carried away by his own flood of words. He shook his fist at the old woman and called down punishment on those who led an immoral life—he stormed against beauty preparations, while he himself was surrounded by an odour of fine ointment, which had the unpleasant effect of attracting flies, a cloud of which buzzed about his head. And as he strutted and flung his head back in the way he had seen other prophets do, he felt disgusted with himself for being merely a tool, a babbling mill, the very last thing he wished to be.

Nor did he find in his audience the response he expected. Perhaps they were kept in check by his exalted station; they too would have liked to protest against one thing and another, but they threw sidelong glances at the soldiers standing there with their leather whips and looking as if they would

be glad of a chance to use them. In the hope of carrying the people with him Jonah shouted louder and louder. His head was on fire, his tongue was swollen, and his throat felt as dry as an old boot. He tried to work himself up to a ringing peroration, but it was no use, and he concluded abruptly and crawled down from the roof of the litter.

"Well? How did it go?" he asked.

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The leader said he had pulled through all right. That wasn't exactly what Jonah expected to hear. He was dissatisfied with himself.

The crowd scattered, only the old woman remained behind—not because she was converted—she was begging. Jonah gave her a copper and slipped into the litter, vexed with his robe of honour, his ointments and his stupid eloquence. He was so disgusted with himself that if it had been possible he would have wriggled out of his skin and soared away into nothingness, like a defective soul only fit for the scrap-heap. But there was no drawing back, the inglorious comedy had to proceed.

X

WHEN JONAH came home he stole quietly into the house, with no eyes for peacocks, goldfish or other glories. He had been prepared to suffer for his disobedience, but he had not looked for so severe a punishment as the withdrawal of the Voice. Without it he was only a very ordinary scribe or cake-seller. It was his connection aloft that had given meaning to his life; and now that connection was broken. How long would he be permitted to occupy this house and wear the Silver Shield and draw his monthly salary?

He was humbled. He wished to ask pardon for his disobedience, and he fell on his knees on the bare tiles of the floor and prayed aloud that the Lord would forgive him. But his words struck back, as when a man spits against the wind and gets it in his face.

He thumped his breast with his clenched fist, as he had seen his old father do when he turned to the Lord in fear and sorrow. And he cried: "Hear me!" But the

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Lord would not hear. Jonah could feel that in himself. It is a peculiarity of prayer that it is sometimes like a cold motor which refuses to start. It is no

use shricking "O God!" when the words are stifled between the walls of one's room. Prayers are like those birds that a better Brother of Jonah fashioned out of clay by the Lake of Gennesareth and made to rise up to heaven—the birds Jonah made lay heavy, grey and damp on the flat earth.

It was the same uncomfortable situation that sometime arises between a married couple, when they quarrel and one of them goes out and shuts the door, although at the moment there are a thousand things that ought to be said. Thus Jonah stood before the locked gate of heaven and could not reach the bell, though he stood on the very tips of his toes. He knocked, but the mighty copper gate returned no sound. And he stood alone in the great void.

But the Lord is not the only one who knows that it is not good for man to be alone, and so they say that when God goes out at one door, the Devil comes in at the other.

A slave announced that Pilo, master of the five hundred story-tellers, wished to visit Jonah, and before the slave had finished delivering his message he was pushed aside by that importunate person: "That'll do, my friend. I announce myself."

This was the last man in the world Jonah cared to see now, but he could not show him the door—nor was he sufficiently versed in the ways of polite society to know how one receives such a visitor—but Pilo saved him the trouble. The fat little man flung himself on a cushion, as though his body was a sack he wanted to get rid of, and said: "Well, I must say! You've got a swell place here. I know this room. It was here the Keeper of the

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Great Seal lived when he was murdered."

As he said this he laughed, showing his filed teeth, which put Jonah in mind of a rodent that lived on what he could pick up. lie had mentioned this about the Keeper of the Seal in order to annoy Jonah and give him a spiritual ducking, and it worked as intended, for when Jonah came up to the surface again he asked respectfully how he could be of service.

"You can't!" said Pilo. "On the contrary, it is I who come to do you a service. I heard you speak to-day. And let me tell you frankly, as one friend to another, it wasn't all it should be. Now, now, don't lose heart. It'll come in time, when I've explained to you what Nineveh expects."

The small remnant of strength left in Jonah faded at these blunt words. He felt so small that he was like a stranger in his own house. The other had captured it from him entirely by the brutality of his manner.

Jonah attempted a feeble protest. He repeated what he had said the day before, that it was not his own ideas he gave voice to. It was a more powerful spirit that spoke through him.

"No, my dear friend," said Pilo. "Don't tell me that kind of thing. I'll have the courtesy to think you deceive yourself, but you can't deceive me. It was no god that spoke through you to-day. It was just simply a little man whose name is Jonah. Ah, but there's no harm in that. Who do you suppose talks through the other reformers who stand at street corners in the hot season when brains are on the boil? Why, of course it's nothing but their own disappointed hopes, their broken ambitions, their vain dreams. I know human nature. That's my profession. But here we are, sitting in the midst of luxury and

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surrounded by slaves, and yet our throats are dry. You have some wine in the house?"

He clapped his hands, and when a slave girl approached he ordered her to bring wine, exactly as if he were the master. Jonah let it pass. He was completely cornered, knowing that the other had seen through him, and he admitted brokenly that the Voice had failed him to-day. What was he to do?

The slave girl came in with the wine. Pilo poured it out and asked if Jonah would not keep him company. Jonah declined with regret.

"The wine's excellent," said Pilo. "Only it should have been colder." When he had drained two cups he said: "That business of the Voice need not detain us. We can call it imagination. Possibly gods exist, but they certainly have other things to do than to speak through you or me. But even if it wasn't a Voice that was speaking, you came out of it quite well, so what you most need is a certain polish."

Jonah again admitted having felt there was no power in him to-day—

"I can tell you why," interposed Pilo. "It's perfectly simple: you've lost your venom. Prophets have got to feel cold and hunger, they must be stoned, tortured and spat upon. How can one be a prophet, living in a house like this and fortunate in love into the bargain? I heard to-day you're to be married to Nahum's daughter at the full moon."

"At the full moon?" repeated Jonah in surprise.

"Ah, so you didn't know it yourself! Yes, I know everything, my friend, often before it happens. That's my way of hearing voices. But my

congratulations! You'll have a pretty young bride, but do you think that

will help your prophetic powers? The happier you are, the less capable you'll be of working up the great asperity. And that's the thing that keeps the prophets going. But perhaps it will be some assistance if you think hard of what Samsin will do to you the day he finds the fizz has gone out of you. Then the same hurricane that swept you into this house will sweep you out again, and I shouldn't care to be in your shoes. Perhaps he'll have you burnt as a false prophet."

It was not hard to damp Jonah's courage, he was feeling so limp to-day. He was like a climbing plant that had lost the stick up which it wound and now lay flat upon the earth. Anybody might walk over him, and the man with the malicious smile took pleasure in doing so. He pictured the tortures that awaited Jonah if he turned out a disappointment.

Jonah was frightened to the depths of his soul. The part he had undertaken was beyond his powers if he was to perform it unaided, and he said: "How can I be a prophet if the Spirit refuses to move me?"

"Don't be so solemn about it," said Pilo. "How can one be a singer without a voice or a poet without talent? When the poet has uttered the couple of odes that are born in him by the help of the gods he has to go on living just the same. So what does he do? He gives out the same songs over again—ten times, a hundred times—only with a few little variations. It only requires dexterity, and that can be learnt."

"But when people find out it's only myself—"

"My dear fellow," said Pilo, "there's nobody in the whole crowd who believes in the Voice—not as a firm conviction anyhow. But it would be amusing, if it were true, and so they pretend to believe. Don't have any

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scruples about humbugging people; there's nothing they like better. But of course, as an honest man, you must in the first place do what you are paid for. You must go for the priests. You must say that the Lord, who has sent you, will pour out his wrath upon Nineveh unless the priests submit obediently to the leadership of the King. People understand that. The gods themselves you must leave alone."

"Yes, but that's just what the Lord won't let me do!" said Jonah. "He is angry because the people worship idols."

"No, no, whatever you do, don't touch the gods. That's a thing one has to be careful about. Not for the sake of those who really believe—they'll only pity you and say you're mad—but there are lots of people who both believe and don't believe and who are scared to death of being shaken in the factitious piety they have vamped up. So remember to keep off the gods. The priests, on the other hand, are fair game. People like hearing them abused. You can't go far wrong either if you blacken the King's advisers pretty thoroughly—but never the King himself! He is inviolable. And one thing more: never talk about women's clothes or about their using lip-stick and pencilling their eyebrows."

"Yes, but that's an abomination in the eyes of the Lord," said Jonah.

"Possibly, but let others tell them so. Leave that to the prophets who are used to getting rotten eggs shied at them. It's waste of breath to talk sense to people who are in the fashion. I see you're staggering about in a pair of bright red shoes that certainly give you a lot of pain. You walk as if you had coconut shells tied under your feet. Look at me. I wear comfortable flat-soled slippers. But

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I've noticed you can't keep your eyes off those shoes, so of course you'll go on wearing them. Isn't that so? Then why be so hard on the women? On the other hand you mustn't spare the People. There you have a free hand. You must pepper the People well with fire and brimstone and all kinds of horrors. Only none of what I heard to-day, when I saw you point at an old woman while you were talking about immorality, or when you shouted at a man in a fine cloak that the Lord doesn't like those who go in soft raiment. Never point! You may do that for your own amusement on the day you're carried to the place of execution and it's all up with you anyhow. But not before that. The thing to say is: The *People* of Nineveh deserve to be burnt at the stake. The *People* of Nineveh are idiotic, immoral, treacherous—anything you like—that can only please your hearers, as each one of them thinks the *People* is all the rest—those who stand round you, each of them thinking that it does the *People* good to be told the truth."

Thus spoke the man of experience, and Jonah listened and was compelled to admit that it sounded like sense. It was just the way in which many before him had made their fortune: Give Nineveh what Nineveh wants! Tell Nineveh what Nineveh expects to be told! But Jonah had been the prophet of the Lord, since the Voice within him had said something far

more important, namely what Nineveh needed to be told, whether Nineveh liked it or not. Only this could never turn out to be good business, nor was that what the Voice intended. And as Jonah still hoped to make a business out of his existence—to achieve success—it suited him to follow Pile's advice. He thanked him for his instructions.

"You have nothing to thank me for," said Pilo. "But

there remains a matter of form. One good turn deserves another, you understand. To-morrow my five hundred reciters will introduce your name into their stories. The fee will be fifty pieces of silver, which you may as well pay me at once."

"By all means," said Jonah.

## XI

THEN THE remarkable thing happened, that Jonah got on quite well without the Voice. He said the things that Nineveh wished him to say, and Nineveh was well pleased. Even Samsin, who was supposed to be a man of some shrewdness, sent word that the King was satisfied. Only Jonah was not to spare the priests. Not one of them understood that what he was doing now was in reality worthless, since it was a circus performance instead of a hell-fire sermon.

Ah, but Jonah himself understood it! Jonah was not happy—or perhaps he was just as the mob's applause rang in his ears, but not when he reached home and found himself alone in the great house. He had never been so lonely before. Etiquette forbade him to visit his father-in-law's house before the wedding.

He could not help thinking of his childhood in a home where he rose in the morning and lay down in the evening with the Lord in his thoughts. He himself had held daily converse with the Most High. Naturally he dared not mention this to Pilo, who would only scoff, but he believed it himself—nay, he knew it, for he had felt an accession of strength when the eye of God fell upon him. And now he was alone in the world. Absolutely alone. For strictly speaking there is only this one being

in the universe—God or the Lord—whom a man knows and can really speak to face to face and thought to thought without guile. Perhaps he who has never tried it cannot understand it, but Jonah felt as if he had been banished from truth and life into a world of shadows where all was unreality.

And as one is most attached to the departed, so was there in him a longing for the Voice: if only it would come back—ah, if only it would vouchsafe to revile him as never before. But he was surrounded by silence, and his nights were full of dread, since his life was now governed by blind chance. True, all went well at present, but for how long?

He went out every day and spoke from the roof of his litter. He was always sure of an audience, thanks to the publicity of the five hundred reciters; and he himself had grown bolder, so that he carried himself with dignity. For the real prophets have something strangely feverish and unpleasant in their manner, since they lack the amiability which comes as a matter of course to those whose profession it is to speak flatteringly. And perhaps they are also possessed by fear, knowing they may be set upon at any moment. Jonah, on the other hand, was safe. He knew that the Bodyguard was standing by, looking grim and swinging their whips, so the mob thought it best to keep quiet.

One day he was incautious enough to touch on the problem of polytheism. And a man called out: "What am I to do if I get toothache? Shall I give a dove to Ilullu? Or ought I to trouble the Supreme God if there's blight in my cucumbers?"

Jonah was taken aback. For this was a knotty point. But the men with the whips were already after the interrupter

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and thrashed him so thoroughly that he had to drag himself miserably away from the meeting.

By degrees Jonah had learnt what impressed his hearers. They were above all delighted when he gave them a good dose of brimstone. They loved to hear him picture the horrors that would come upon Nineveh if the city were not converted to honesty, temperance, morality and true piety. Of course none of them believed the conversion would take place, for one cannot wash a negro white, but they took the delineation of the punishments as a fairy-tale of the kind that made them shudder, without their really being able to imagine it could ever come true.

"You've all heard about Sodom, haven't you?" said Jonah. "You know what happened there. But Sodom was only a city of innocent babes compared with this anthill you call Nineveh. And what became of Sodom? Lot went out into the fields with his brother-in-law to tend the sheep, when suddenly he found a little dark brown spot on his light cloak of camel's hair. 'What's this?' he says, trying to brush it off, for he thought it was a smut from a chimney. But the speck was not to be brushed off! And presently his brother-in-law discovered more and more of the same specks, making him think they were being splashed with ink; but then they noticed a smell of burning, and Lot said: 'Blest if I don't think it's a shower of sparks!'

"That's how it begins—little by little. You wonder, thinking it's something funny. But the great clouds gather, and their brick-red colour turns to purple, like angry sores. And now they open. The scattered sparks give way to a hail of live coals. The coals are as big as walnuts, as big as goose-eggs! The earth trembles. The street opens before your feet and from the yawning gulf

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a tongue of fire shoots up and scorches your venerable beard! Are you now beginning to understand that the anger of the Lord is after you? Oh, how they hurry, those who sit by their beer-mugs in the alehouse. Look how respectable citizens come running out of the brothel in broad daylight. In terror of their lives they forget their disgrace. Which way—which way? they cry, not knowing where to turn.

"And so will you run on the day when proud Nineveh is burning. You will see the houses a mass of flame, and the slender palms will stand up straight blazing like torches, and when they are consumed they will bend over and shrivel up like the charred wick of a candle. You will see the temple towers totter and change to smoking heaps of rubbish. On the bridges over the river people will struggle confusedly and trample one another down. For God's wrath is upon them! Here the live coals will not fall like hail, so that you can take shelter from them; they will pursue you like living fiery wasps with red-hot stings. They will settle on you and sting you to death with their flaming needles. And there will be shrieks and torment, and those who are not burnt up will plunge into the river, thinking it a relief to find death there!

"Then what are we to do, my friends? We must turn away from the priestly horde and the domination of the priesthood and place our hopes in God's deputy on earth, our well-beloved King Sargon—"

When he reached this point some people in the crowd raised shouts of joy, calling: "Hear, hear! A prophet has spoken! Down with the priests!" This delighted Jonah, who bowed like an actor acknowledging the applause after a big scene. He did not know it was a paid claque, sent by Samsin to keep things going.

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In the evening Jonah had himself carried back to his house, took a bath and made a good meal. Perhaps he sent a basket of choice flowers and fruit to Sarah, after which he walked in his garden, with slow, heron-like gait, as he had seen people of quality walk; but only till he thought he was out of sight and could be himself. Then he sat down on the grass under the walnut-tree, where the blackbird usually sang its evening song before going to rest. And it amused him to catch the tiny frogs which swarmed in the grass, in anticipation of the night's rain. He held them in the hollow of his hand and smiled as they crawled about. And he let them go again, for he was a kind creature. But he did not know that the slaves stole after him and spied on him from the bushes, saying to one another: "Is that a prophet? Does a prophet look like that? Does a prophet amuse himself by playing with frogs as if he were a child? Why, he's nothing but just an ordinary little Jew who's come into money!"

Jonah soon tired of the little frogs. He lay down in the grass supporting his head in the hollow of his hand, and had a strange feeling that his head too was hollow, his whole life, in fact. He forced himself to think of the time when he had to shield his basket of cakes against the gulls in Tyre, and, comparing past with present, he thought he ought to be happier now. But he was bored. Here he was, alone in this great house with a few slaves, to whom he dared not talk; for he had discovered that the moment he treated them as human beings they became impudent. Then there was the leader of the Guard—a vulgar man who was always worrying him to play draughts; but Jonah refused, as he was certain the other would cheat him. And then he was in love. That only disturbed him, as he longed for the beloved and was not allowed to see her.

And then the terrible consciousness that he was not a prophet at all, but merely an impostor who found it to his interest to deceive himself and others.

All his life he had pursued a phantom which men called Success. In like manner a fool runs after a woman whom he has only seen from the back, and when at last he catches hold of her dress and forces her to turn round, she shows him the face of a Medusa. But then it is too late to withdraw. He is wedded to her for life.

How was it with the true prophets? Did they ever achieve success? The greatness of a prophet lies precisely in the tragedy that, knowing his fate, he still advances undismayed towards the goal to which the Voice directs him. He knows that his life is to serve as a bridge over which the world may march on the way to a new life. And he submits. Even though he too may have harboured a childish dream of success. That is why prophets have wild eyes and trembling lips and hands that close like claws, and bristling hair like tufts of desert grass, which may yet conceal the nest of a lark. And when at last they are stoned to death, their souls are carried on golden clouds straight into God's azure heaven.

But then Jonah didn't want to be a prophet like these. He had begged the Lord for success, explaining that it was the pedestal on which the prophet must stand in order to tower above the people. And now, when he stood on the pedestal, he realized that the distinguishing mark of the great prophets was the very fact that they didn't need any pedestal. They possessed what was much better: their stature! They were born a head taller than all the people.

Jonah was interrupted in these melancholy thoughts by a man coming from the house, throwing himself on the

grass and wriggling forward like a fawning dog—as one had to wriggle forward when admitted to the King's presence. This annoyed Jonah, and he told the man sharply to get up. As the stranger then advanced with bowed head, he saw that it was Joseph the cook, with whom he had talked in the market-place on the day he had jumped into the river. Jonah invited him to

First of all Joseph wished to tender his most respectful congratulations on Jonah's preferment, and then to offer his services. A Jew could not do without Jews, he said. There were so many ways in which the heathen

approach and asked in a kindly tone what he wanted.

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slaves were not" to be depended upon. They knew no difference between clean and unclean and they were thievish.

"I heard you in the square to-day," he said. "And I knew you at once and said to myself: the Lord has exalted this man. Perhaps he will make your fortune."

"Don't you sell food any more?" asked Jonah.

"No, I couldn't make it go. I tried dealing in coloured ribbons for the hair—that didn't go either."

"What did you get out of my speech to-day?"

"It was fine. Especially that about Sodom—it gave me cold shivers."

"But did you understand my meaning?"

Joseph looked at him blankly. It had never crossed his mind that there was anything to understand, so he said: "Who am I, that I should dare to reflect on what a learned man says."

"But surely you have not forgotten the faith of our fathers?" said Jonah.

"No, far be it from me. Every morning I've given my mite to Nebo, to get him to help my business."

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"Nebo?" said Jonah, shocked. "Don't you know that that's an idol?"

"Yes, but he's such a nice little god, he'll accept little things that don't cost anything—a flower, a bird's feather, anything of that sort."

"And does he help you?"

"Sometimes," said Joseph. "And then he's so much easier to get on with than the Lord. What would the Lord say if I went to him and prayed for good business? He'd say: Use new-laid eggs for your dishes, Joseph; throw away that cheap sesame oil, you know very well it's rancid. Never buy animals that have died a natural death."

"Well, but that's right, isn't it?" said Jonah.

"Of course it's right, but where does the profit come in?"

Jonah didn't know what answer to make, for he himself was adulterating the spiritual fare he served out to the public for the sake of profit. But he liked to hear someone babbling in his native tongue and he was quite willing to do something for him.

"I can try taking you into my household," he said; "but I won't have you sacrificing to idols here. You must leave that to the slaves. Let me see you are deserving of my confidence."

Joseph had arrived at a lucky moment, when Jonah was oppressed with solitude. And what was one to do in Nineveh, where a dog was a devourer of carrion and an abomination not to be touched by a decent man? So one had to fall back on a fellow-human, or be content with a bird or a tortoise.

When Joseph had taken an oath to serve Jonah loyally they went together into the house and struck the great

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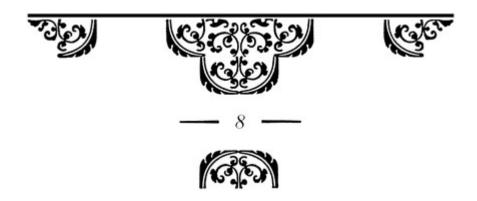
copper vessel which served as a gong to call the slaves. They assembled from their work in the outhouses and fell in by the door; Jonah made them another little speech, saying he had appointed a steward, a fellow-countryman, who was in every way a strict, prudent and experienced man, but at the same time a just man, who would see that everyone did his duty, and that everyone had fair play.

He then pushed Joseph forward, so that he too might say something to his future subordinates; and Joseph, slipping at once into the role of departmental manager, addressed them:

"You have just heard what powers your master has given me. I am incorruptible and I never overlook any kind of dishonesty or slackness. So it will be the worse for you if you don't attend to your duties." But when he had said this he pulled out a bunch of silk ribbons and changed his tone completely: "I don't know if the ladies and gentlemen are interested in superfine ribbons? I have a remnant here, selling off dirt cheap, business closing down. Come on now, what offers?"

This first act of his administration was not to Jonah's taste, and the master of the house withdrew, but not so far as to miss seeing whether Joseph made any sale. Business was in his blood.

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So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them... And God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them... But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

n Nineveh more than anywhere else on earth one day resembled another, excepting just in the rainy season. The sun rose in a wan ochrous gleam on account of the dryness of the atmosphere. It could not afford the gorgeous changes of colour that Jonah remembered when it rose over Lebanon flushing the clouds with red. Here it came up like a big round cheese, which became white-hot in the course of a few minutes, so that one could not bear to look at it. Then it wandered across a cloudless sky, scorching plants and beasts. It got on people's nerves. That was probably the reason there was so much irritability in Nineveh.

Jonah got up as soon as it was light. He shaved himself 245

with a razor resembling a spatula, took out his robe of honour, anointed his hair and sprinkled a few drops of attar of roses on his cloak, after which he wandered about his room muttering like an actor repeating his part.

At first it had been so easy to stand up on a step and say to the Voice: "Now I'm ready!" and then the words poured out of him. Now everything had to be carefully prepared and studied. But of course there was the compensation that one knew one wouldn't say anything that would get one into trouble.

Every morning before putting on his red shoes he examined his feet to see if the soles were getting less horny. One would like to be presentable at one's own wedding, and a man with an inch of tough skin under his feet can hardly pass muster. When he looked at himself in a metal mirror he thought he was quite youthful and attractive. A look of benevolence had come into his face. It had not escaped him that people who live in fine houses and have servants who hit poor folks on the head with cabbage-stalks may yet be quite pleasant. And now, when he preached about the destruction of Nineveh, he made the private reservation that it ought not to apply to families with an income above five thousand silver pieces a month; and it never occurred to him that this was precisely his own income. There must be a limit, he thought.

Indeed, he had already grown so accustomed to his new existence that he began to bewail the bad times. His house was large, his slaves cost a lot of money, and only two of them had anything to do but to look after the garden. The Bodyguard, whom he had to maintain at his own expense, ate and drank like hogs. There were also many things to be provided in view of his marriage.

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The house was to be made comfortable. He had visits from people who sold limestone figures to be set up in the garden, or bronze tripods from Greece, or ivory caskets from Phœnicia, or rare glass goblets that looked like lilies of green sea-foam on incredibly slender stalks—they came from Sidon. He was told it was the fashion in all great houses to collect this sort of thing. Ah, he thought, it certainly costs money to be well off.

After a time Jonah became a well-known public figure. He received offers of marriage not only from light women, but also from elderly rich widows whose intensions were serious. All the religious dissenters in Nineveh paid him visits and talked by the hour about their crochets. Beggars surrounded his door when he came home, expecting a holy man to be ready to share his wealth with them. Practical folk, who knew he had come into money, brought him schemes, seeking his support. One wanted to start a ferry service across the river; another tried to get him interested in a factory of shot-proof cotton tunics that would turn an arrow. He had every opportunity of experiencing the inconveniences of notoriety.

He was visited almost daily by Pilo, who was full of good advice and an untiring critic. This amused him, as he had no gift of eloquence himself and

liked to take it out of those who had.

Jonah no longer took him so seriously. It was becoming clear to him that the other's air of superiority was a manner he had assumed, like certain insects which adopt a formidable attitude in order to produce an impression. But Jonah had now acquired a manner of his own. His presence was more dignified, and when Pilo started giving orders to the household slaves, Jonah interposed

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in an unobtrusive way.

Samsin had sent word that Jonah was just to go on speaking as he had begun. He had the King's confidence. He had also received his first month's salary and was nervous about all this cash in the house; several times a day he had to go to the chest to see if it was still there. He was still so unused to being rich.

Something had come over him for which he could find no word. He had previously known anxiety and uncertainty, but only as a ruffling of the surface, since in the depths of his nature there dwelt a confidence in the protection of a kind Lord in Heaven. Now he was uneasy in a new way. This was another modern trait in him: he had nerves. They assert themselves quite automatically when a person has to live strenuously on his own responsibility.

He started at a sudden sound, he was always on his guard and his eyes darted hither and thither, for there is so much to be watched and seen to when one's actions are governed by reason and not by instinct. He had also grown irritable and found it an easy matter to scold a slave for breaking a bowl—but this he mistook for a sign of gentility and thought he was making progress.

To make things worse he heard news which upset him a good deal. He now had rivals and imitators. Pilo told him that prophets had arisen in several quarters—"real fast-colour prophets," he said with malicious emphasis, knowing it would hurt Jonah. "Genuine prophets that are dirty and poor, full of venom and gall which they pour out in rough, hoarse voices. But that's just how the public likes them," he said.

What can this be? thought Jonah. Up to now he'd been told to speak agreeably to the people. Why this

sudden change to force and ruthlessness? What was there remarkable about these prophets?

Well, Pilo could explain that too.

"It's no use wrapping up your truths so that they're lost in tinsel paper," he said. "These men talk straight out, right in people's faces, like a punch on the nose. They point at their hearers one by one and say: 'You there—yes, it's you I mean—you shrivelled usurer! Or you woman with the bold eyes, you poisonous vermin, infecting those you embrace in arms rubbed with flour that should have made bread for the poor,—you see, that's the way!"

"But what do their hearers say to this? Do they put up with it all?"

"No, naturally they don't. There's a shower of cabbage-stalks, rotten eggs, camel-dung and melon peel. But what does that matter?" Pilo smiled diabolically, and now he knew his shaft would go home: "You see, the real prophets have no fine robe of honour to get spoilt. They are beaten, trampled on and dragged in the dirt, but all the same they have their will. *They have witnessed!* They have given the word wings! The truth—assuming what they say to be truth—rises like an eagle above the dirt. The people they have insulted can't bring that down from heaven."

"But what about me?" asked Jonah uneasily.

Pilo smiled with his ugly lips and his little eyes became two slits, from the corners of which his malicious soul peeped out.

"Yours is quite another case," he said. "You are not an ordinary prophet. You are a royally appointed official with five thousand silver pieces a month. You get that for keeping within bounds. And it's a great art to draw 249

the line, my dear Jonah. You are no reformer or scourge of society—you are a business man. You only say half of what has to be said, and you're well paid for it; whereas those who say the whole get stoned. Yes, I call that prudence and self-command. You really deserve your success. For it requires an effort to keep back the truth when it's boiling up within you—doesn't it? But naturally you are not a prophet in the true sense of the word, and you don't want to be one either—isn't that so?"

Ah, that was the question. What did Jonah really want? He would have liked to be a real prophet, but at the same time he wanted to make money. The two things were incompatible. He had made his choice. He was up to

the neck in success, and he had to be content with that. Pilo had made this clear with malicious frankness.

Jonah could not make out what pleasure this person found in tormenting him. Or did the Lord use this unworthy creature as an instrument of punishment, since he would no longer speak to Jonah himself? Or was it that the desire of success had raised a wall between Jonah and the Lord, so that with the best will in the world the Voice could not call him up? Had Jonah detached the aerial from his receiver? And was he to draw wisdom from this muddy source, this Pilo, who drank his wine, borrowed his money and in return scoffed at him with elaborate cunning?

As Jonah did not trust Pilo he sent Joseph out into the city in order to hear what these new prophets were talking about. Joseph came back very enthusiastic. In his stupidity he laid no restraint upon his admiration, though every word cut Jonah to the heart.

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"They're first-rate," said Joseph, as if it were jugglers he was talking about. "I promise you, they can shake people up! It's not like what you say. They shout that Nineveh is going to be destroyed with fire and brimstone, all the priests are to be got rid of, and the wealth of the temples is to be divided among the poor!"

"Why, that's just what I've said myself—except that about dividing the wealth," said Jonah.

"But these here men say it so that you can understand it better," said Joseph. "They don't use roundabout language, and they don't talk like gentlemen. You ought to hear some of the words they use. And what folks like best of all is that about dividing up the money."

"But that's sheer insanity. Do you really believe it will ever happen?"

"No, of course nobody believes that, but it's fine to hear it all the same."

Jonah was alarmed. This again was the result of his being wrapt up in his little private business. It it had merely been a question of the voice of the Lord making itself heard, it would not have mattered whether he or any other were its spokesman. But Jonah was afraid of losing his job. He laid aside his robe of honour and went barefoot as a plain man out into the streets of Nineveh in order to hear the new prophets with his own ears.

He did not have to go far to find the first one, who had climbed up on the pedestal of a stele in the market-place. Jonah was forced to admit that the man had the proper make-up with flowing hair, ragged cloak and foaming mouth.

"Woe! Woe!" he yelled. "Woe to the painted women. Woe to the children who rebel against their

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parents and say: We know best! Woe to the tax-gatherers! Woe to the priests who lull the people to sleep, making them forget to demand their rights!" And suddenly he thundered over the assembled crowd: "I put this question to these fair-minded men and women standing here: Are not the majority of people in this city worthless and don't they deserve to be consumed in eternal fire?"

"Yes, yes!" they shouted. "The prophet's right!"

He went further and asked: "Are not the majority in this city more senseless than brute beasts?"

"Yes, yes! They're surely more senseless than the beasts!"

There was not a word about the Lord, nothing about any gods great or small, no interpretation of scripture, nothing about sin. "Is that what you call a prophet?" Jonah asked his neighbours.

As these decent people could smell that Jonah was scented with attar of roses they saw he must be a man of the upper class, and they felt so honoured by his asking their opinion that they agreed with him.

Translating their agreement into action they fell upon the prophet and belaboured him soundly. When he lay with his face to the ground without moving they went their way. Only Jonah stayed behind. He saw the prophet raise his head and look about him, get on his knees and feel if his limbs were whole. Jonah knew all about it; he had tried it himself.

He said to the man: "Is it worth while to expose yourself to this?"

And the man replied calmly, as he removed the dust and dirt from his beard: "It is always worth while to proclaim the truth."

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"How do you know that it is truth?" asked Jonah.

"That's quite simple," said the man. "Why else do you suppose they would maltreat me?"

Jonah said: "But what you've been saying is only a continuation of the preaching of a certain Jonah."

"Who's Jonah?" asked the man.

"Haven't you heard that a prophet has arisen on whom the King has bestowed a robe of honour?"

"Oh, is it him?" said the man contemptuously. "Why, he's only paid by the swells to put us off with talk."

Jonah made no answer. He walked on and found another prophet. This time one of those who approached the problem from a new side. They confessed their sins, and that might be interesting enough.

This was a fat man, who addressed his hearers thus: "Oh, my friends! I am a great sinner! I have looked upon a woman with impure eyes!"

But then a man in the crowd shouted: "You've done worse than that. You sold me a camel that's lame of one leg. Give me back my money!"

The fat man quickly jumped down from the box he stood on and lost himself in the crowd. He had no wish to confess the kind of sins which entailed compensation.

Jonah said to himself: Pilo must have been exaggerating. There can't possibly be any future for this sort of thing. Fortunately people are not so stupid as all that!

II

THERE WERE fifty thousand priests and priestesses in Nineveh and they had discovered long ago that a conspiracy was on foot against them. Therefore the chief

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priest of the Temple of the Moon had summoned his colleagues to a conference.

The Temple of the Moon was not a house, but a city within the city, like the Imperial City of Peking or the Kremlin of Moscow. The whole precinct was surrounded by a wall with four gates, and at each gate sat soldiers, who, like a Papal Guard, were directly under the orders of the temple. They wore white cloaks with a big green disk on the back to represent the moon—for the Assyrians imagined the light of the moon was green.

After passing the gates there was still a long way to go before reaching the temple. What met one's view was like a fair or a cattle-show or an international exhibition. Sacrificial animals were grazing in the fields, and along the four main roads leading to the temple itself sat women selling birds and fruit, Indian conjurers, Babylonian soothsayers and Arabian story-tellers. There were dealers in eggs, monkeys and clay pots, there were blind men playing lamentable strains on the flute in the hope of having something dropped into the bowl lying before them.

These four roads or amusement parks enclosed the fields in which the temple slaves were at work hoeing the vegetables. For during the fast green vegetables were the only food of the priests. They were afraid of fish, which was said to be conducive of leprosy, when taken without strong drink. Farther along the temple road you came to little houses which served as agencies, caravan offices and writing rooms. The Assyrians were a methodical people and liked to have all agreements inscribed on clay tablets.

Still farther on you came to the great storehouses for those temple dues which were received in the form

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of provisions. As the priests could not themselves consume all the honey, eggs, corn and oil that was delivered, they opened shops for the sale of the surplus. Bartering went on everywhere for exchanging perishable goods for those that would keep. There was nothing sacred about this trading; it was carried on with southern turmoil, which rose to a deafening din as one approached the main temple. Criers were shouting, instruments shrieking, cows bellowing, doves cooing, and a ceaseless movement of men, asses and loaded camels raised the fine yellow dust which made folks drink much beer.

But when one arrived at the main entrance of the temple and passed into the shade, there was silence and peace. A great many people came and went in the course of the day, but they spoke in whispers. They walked quietly in and sought out the priest who was to pass on their offering. He accepted their doves, their eggs or their pot of honey and extended a hand above the giver in blessing. Then they knelt before a sacred image, touched their forehead and breast and went out again.

Very few ventured into the holy of holies, where the priests moved in procession ringing little bells and performing strange rites which were not understood by the laity. Only offerings of a certain size were accepted here, and no one was admitted without having first passed through the bath and been examined by the temple barber, who had to guarantee that the worshipper had nothing alive on him. The god was just as strict in such matters as the King.

From side buildings where the craftsmen were at work came the sound of hammering and beating. The looms of the harlots clattered near by. For besides priestesses the temple contained sacred harlots, whose earnings went

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into the temple treasury. It was these women who roused the anger of the prophets of Israel. "Woe! Woe to those defilers of the sanctuary!" they cried. But it was a shame to rail at them like this. They believed they were doing a good deed. They sat in the porches of the temple on high stools, painted and gaily dressed, but they were not to be regarded as prostitutes. On the contrary, they were very serious and dignified. On being relieved—for they sat in watches—they went to the looms. They were industrious and modest in their own way. And when the time came for them to leave the service of the temple, they always found some respectable believer who hoped they would bring good luck to his home.

If an inquisitive Greek traveller enquired disrespectfully of one of the priests what was the meaning of these women, it would be explained to him that they were a symbol of sublime ideas, not to be grasped either by Greeks or Jews. They were a survival of the distant age when communities were ruled by the mothers, and men were not admitted to the priesthood. Assyria too had her mysteries, and there were things which could not be explained to the uninitiated. Therefore they must be content with a symbol.

"But," the curious Greek tourist would ask, "does that mean you throw dust in the eyes of these people?"

"By no means," the priest would reply. "In any case no more than when one tells children that their little brothers and sisters come from the great well before the Temple of the Sun. When they grow up they will discover how it is for themselves, and one might expect the same of the people. For that matter there is likewise in Greece a vast difference between the philosophers'

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ideas of the gods and the beliefs of the ordinary peasant."

Therefore one must not imagine that the priests who were now assembling in the Temple of the Moon were deceivers. Not at all! Religions change, but priests are the same in all ages and all over the world; perhaps because it is the same god they serve, without reflecting upon it. They bear

the impress of the martyrdom of knowing more than they are permitted to say, since their congregation is an army on the march and the pace must be regulated to suit the shortest legs. But the criterion of a religion's subtlety is precisely this broadminded capacity for slowing down the pace so that the lesser brethren may keep up.

The chief priest had gathered his friends together and received them at the entrance to the chamber underneath the great pyramid-tower—the holy of holies, to which only initiates were admitted. He was an insignificant-looking old man in a robe of yellow silk with a bald head on a wrinkled neck, which made the little acolytes say he was like a tortoise. He was hard of hearing and had a habit of stretching his neck and manœuvring his head so as to turn his left ear to the speaker—he heard best with that.

There was a friendliness and lenity in his soft voice and manner, which however were not to be taken literally. He was much given to having people burnt for offences against doctrine. Lately there had been a man who thought it impossible that the goddess Ishtar could have been hatched from a pigeon's egg. On another occasion he had had the eyes of an astrologer put out for asserting that the markings one sees on the moon's disk represented a hare, though orthodoxy demanded that one

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should see in them a man with a net on a pole. This was a very important point, as the moon-god Sin uses this net to draw men's souls to himself.

In other ways the chief priest Dungi was a tolerant man. Possibly in his youth he had been possessed of an ungovernable temper; how otherwise should he have known the difficulty of restraining oneself when one's blood is on the boil? He was comparatively ready to forgive the sins that resulted from exuberance of temperament, but was vindictive in his persecution of intellectual aberrations.

Here then sat these old men, some of whom were wise and pious, others merely crafty, but they all had brains. A life of purity had made them spiritual—they ate no meat, abstained from strong drink, and cleansed themselves daily; they fasted till they were like shadows, but there was toughness and energy in them. Their level of culture was such that as yet they only glimpsed a dawn of the heavenly light, and love was not very active in them, but their hatred was terrible.

They met in the black marble hall beneath the pyramid-tower, where the walls were smooth and black, the floor was black, the ceiling black and the

stone seats along the walls black, but at the end of the hall stood the mighty statue of the moon-god. It was twelve feet high and made of blocks of glass cunningly mortised together, so that it could be illuminated from within by many lamps. The light, penetrating through the clouded glass, rendered the figure translucent, as though it shone with its own effulgence.

The god was represented as a man with wings and the claws of a bird. As they entered the priests threw themselves on the stone floor and uttered the prescribed greeting.

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Then they quietly went to their seats like an assembly of spirits that had appointed a meeting in a cave.

"My friends," said the chief priest, "we know that when the Giver of all good gifts bestowed fire upon men, he had first to fashion a vessel of clay, that they might be able to carry the live coals. Even those whose hands were pure could not take the fire in their bare palms. But this vessel of clay—is it not religion, the well thought-out system with its prayers, its rites, its images, its sacrifices and its hymns, the vessel wherein men may carry the divine glow which is needful to give warmth to our souls, when the north wind of reason breathes its icy blast upon us?

"And, my friends, the man who comes and says to the people: 'Turn away from the priests!'—is he not sent rather by the Serpent than by God? Otherwise would he desire to break the tender vessel that man has turned, embellished, loved and refined? These gods have we worshipped for five thousand years in Assyria, and who will suppose that during all these ages men have lived under a delusion? And now there has arisen an adventurer, a false prophet, a Jew, who calls himself Jonah, and who, as I learn, was originally a scribe, but was expelled from his caste and sank to selling cakes in Tyre, until he came here as a camel-driver. There can be no doubt that he is being exploited by greater powers; we see that from the fact that the King has given him a robe of honour and a bodyguard; and now I ask: What are we to do to meet the danger that threatens religion in the person of this man and his imitators?"

The youngest of the priests, a hothead of sixty, proposed that they should simply have Jonah dispatched by a man who undertook that sort of work. There was no

lack of poisons that would put him out of the way, and the slaves of his household could always be bought. But an older and more circumspect priest said it was more important to strike at the root of the evil. Their real enemies were the Greek woman Kallista and the chief eunuch Samsin, who had put it into the King's head that it was humiliating for him to live under the tutelage of the holy priests—which of course only meant his submission to the guidance of God, as revealed in omens and prophecies.

But what brings disaster to theologians is that there is always one of their number who talks unctuously and saps the force of the rest by lulling them to sleep with his endless harangue. A man of this kind got up and reminded them that one could not be cautious enough in speaking of the King, who after all was one of the mainstays of religion while at the same time leaning on its support—a thing not to be grasped by human understanding. Moreover, sooner or later people would fall back into the old grooves—perhaps with some trifling alteration of external forms. The only thing to do was to have patience. The temple's storehouses were full, the faithful continued to flock to them. Every hundred years society had an attack of fever, which found vent in a revolution—if not in a great war—it was like opening the safety-valve. (Of course the priest didn't say this, but it was what he meant.) And when the superfluous steam had rushed out with a great noise people quieted down again and dozed for another century. "Therefore, my dear friends and colleagues," he concluded, "let us unite in harmony."

But about what? About doing nothing? For that is

what spiritual fathers find it easiest to unite about, since spirituality has a tendency to make them lazy. Their net of reasoning serves them as a hammock, pleasant to rest in and hard to get out of.

One of the priests asked: "And what of this new god who is supposed to have sent Jonah? Wiry, it's nothing but the Jew god, a little tribal deity of herdsmen and wine-growers in a country so small that a good camel can travel the length and breadth of it in three days. Their sacred books are nothing but a repetition of our own records. The nameless god they have invented is a blend of what children are taught in Egypt and Babylon. And now the egg wants to teach the hen!"

"We are not to be deceived," said the chief priest. "We well know there is something alluring about this all-too-human god, but we know at the

same time that a god is obliged to be strict in dealing with men, as we have to be strict in training animals, who, try as they may, cannot understand what it is their master demands of them. Gods are to be feared!"

"Perhaps," said another, who was not devoid of guile, "perhaps this would not have befallen us if we had remembered to give the greatest of the gods what is his due."

At once the chief priest asked him in honied tones: "What does my brother wish to convey? Is not Sin—the moon-god—the greatest?"

The other considered that Shamash—the sun-god—must be held the most important.

But immediately a third intervened, insisting that the supreme god was Anu—his god.

"Well, yes. We cannot deny that Anu is the Lord of Heaven," said a fourth. "But we know that he cannot be

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approached save through Bel Enlil. And what about Ishtar, the goddess of the mightiest of life's instincts, war and love?"

Finally an old gentleman reminded them with a diabolical smile that they must not overlook the god whom we shall all have to face one day—his god—Nargal, Lord of the Underworld.

Yes, there is no mistake about it: even the tallest trees cannot touch the sky. Now the reverend gentlemen were in the thick of a theological discussion, which by degrees degenerated into a slanging-match, so that the chief priest had to call their attention to the sacredness of their surroundings, face to face with the moon-god himself who stood there shining upon them. The others felt inclined to retort that they didn't care a curse for Sin, who was only fit to be a fool's god, and the scene ended in confusion.

The meeting was adjourned and the old gentlemen emerged from the darkness into the sunshine, blind and helpless as owls, and were taken by the arm and led to their litters by young, tolerantly smiling priests. They collapsed into their seats, old and decrepit, and stretched out skinny hands to bless the faithful who bowed to the ground in reverence. And when they reached home they said to their subordinates: "The misfortune is that we can never agree. And yet it is as clear as daylight that our god is the most important."

A MESSAGE came from Samsin that Jonah was to give up speaking in public. The mighty man sent word that the anti-clerical movement was making good progress and

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that it was wiser to let it take its own course. The public—who could be used in many ways—had taken the matter in hand. But the King was satisfied with Jonah. He was just to stay on in his house and bide his time. Perhaps he would be wanted again.

At first Jonah was glad to be released from acting the prophet, but nevertheless he was haunted by a sense of mortification. He could not imagine that the movement could be kept alive if he retired from it. Would not the public soon the of the parrot-talk of his petty substitutes? He believed himself to be quite unselfish in saying this; for the King had treated him handsomely and he would be sorry if the whole thing died a natural death.

No doubt he had also got used to these daily outings—he liked to watch the crowd assembling—to get on the roof of the litter with the Bodyguard standing below like attendant giants in a fairy-tale—he was fond of showing off his robe of honour with the silver shield on his breast. And now it was all over. New men had the ear of the public.

When he told Pilo about it, that malicious person chuckled and said with no attempt at reticence: "You're finished! Absolutely and entirely finished! Ignominiously chucked! The other prophets have taken the wind out of your sails—just as I foretold a long time ago. You've grown far too cautious. You want something to give colour to your talk—you want snap—you want to bang the big drum!"

Again he got at Jonah with his poison-fang. For he was right. Jonah had been pushed aside and others had taken the lead. And Jonah knew why this had happened. It was because he had denied the Voice. But Pilo should have been the last to reproach him with want of snap—Pilo

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himself had preached the doctrine that you must give Nineveh what Nineveh wants, and Nineveh wanted to be coaxed and flattered.

Jonah resumed his walks abroad, and he saw that the great city was in the grip of a new and strange disease—it had taken to moralizing. People talked eagerly about leading a pious and moral life, as they had formerly talked about horse-racing. They sat in the ale-houses discussing the gods. It had become the fashion to look dismal, to hang your head and speak in a low voice.

He asked what was the meaning of this, and was told that Nineveh was being converted. The powerful speeches of the prophets had taken effect.

Jonah was deeply scandalized. This was not at all the sort of conversion he had had in mind. He had imagined that people would acquire a new heart, which would make them more honest, more friendly, more affectionate. Not only for the Lord's sake, but more for their own. It was so easy to say that the earth was a vale of tears and that it was the Serpent that had beguiled men out of Paradise—the gates still stood open, so that those who were pure of heart might enter in, any day they pleased. The earth abounded in blessings, there might be a superfluity of happiness, health and security for all, if men had not had the terrible failing of poisoning everything they touched. Conversion should consist in their ceasing to spoil one another's existence.

But Jonah found no sign of any improvement in this direction. They talked conversion, but went on cheating, teasing and tormenting one another as they always had done. Perhaps there were some naive ones who believed that if they confessed themselves to be sinners a good God would perform a conjuring trick for them, putting the

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world to rights without their having to do anything about it—and then there were the curious people who thought they were doing the Almighty a service by admitting their own faults! But all this was merely on the surface; no storm had arisen in their souls to stir the depths of the heart.

One would have thought it was a bad time for those who sold ointments and cosmetics, but ingenuity is always at work. A black powder was put on the market, to give elegant ladies an unwashed appearance, which was emphasised by artificial tears of gum resin. Black-bordered nails were the rule, but natural dirt was banned; a black ointment was supplied, to be rubbed in. Sackcloth was the only wear, and the bazaars showed a new material called "sackcloth and ashes". It was a fine black damask interwoven with splashes of white. The shopkeepers in the bazaars, usually

the most conservative of men, began to think there was some good in the new doctrine after all.

It vexed Jonah that he had been dragged here from Tyre in order that people might have a chance of acting this comedy. There was not a spark of seriousness in the new ideas, he thought. Except perhaps that proposal to share out the temple properties; naturally one would not object to see that put in practice.

If he didn't like Nineveh when he was spurned and had his toes trodden on by camels, he liked it still less in its present hypocritical aspect, and he said to himself: As far as I'm concerned it may rain fire this very day! I'm sick of these people.

He was so out of humour that he found no pleasure in his fine house, his peacocks, which irritated him with their screams, or his slaves, who seemed stupid and intrusive now that he no longer had the Bodyguard and they guessed

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his star was declining. He hadn't even any real pleasure in thinking of the money he had made—whether because he did not regard money with the same superstitious awe as when he was poor, or because his thwarted ambition had embittered him.

As he retired to the remotest corner of his garden to escape the sight of men, he suddenly felt the faint shudder which was the prelude to the strange moments when the Voice spoke within him. And now it came from a distance, far, far away, at times quite indistinct, as though it had difficulty in penetrating the insulating sheet of worldliness with which Jonah had surrounded himself.

It said to him: "Well, Jonah, now you can see that money is not everything."

Jonah was so glad to hear the Voice again that he broke out into expressions of gratitude. After that he brought forward his complaint. He had been rejected. The people listened to a set of commonplace impostors who bungled and vulgarized the great ideas of which he had been the spokesman. He admitted having thought for a time that the Lord was stern enough in wishing to destroy this great and flourishing city, but now he saw that it deserved no better fate.

The Voice replied that he must not be surprised at feeling having turned against him. He was a man who had married a harlot—Success was her

name—and now he complained of her deceiving him. What else could be expected?

Jonah bowed his head and acknowledged that the Voice was right; and now all he asked of the Lord was a sign, that he might leave the city with all that was his on the day when fire and brimstone should rain upon it.

"My dear son," said the Voice, "why have you conceived

such hatred for this city, which is seeking to reform itself as well as it can?" What can this be? thought Jonah. Do I hear aright?

"We must not expect them to become holy men and women in an instant," said the Voice. "Ah, my dear son, if you had looked upon the world from above throughout the ages, as I have, you would be the most patient of all men. Progress moves at a foot's pace. That is in fact the natural rate of motion."

Jonah felt as if he had had a blow in the face. Could it be possible that he who reads men's hearts had failed to see that it was only a passing fashion that had possessed these foolish people, who were degrading all that was most serious in life into a farce?

The Voice said mildly that at least they no longer boasted of their wickedness. They realized that they were sinners. That was the first step towards conversion.

"Do you call these monkey tricks conversion?" said Jonah. "Why, a child could see that these people only want to buy themselves a hatful of easy conscience as cheap as they can. Surely you, who read men's hearts, are not going to be taken in by a parcel of women painting their faces black and pretending to be worn out with grief?"

And he added to himself—but dared not say it aloud: And over and above they've rejected the only true prophet and listened to a pack of cheapjacks who beat their breasts like apes and shriek like wild asses!

"No!" he said in a torrent of passion. "Destroy this rabble! Let not one stone be left upon another in Nineveh—destroy me too, if need be! It is better to die than live to see the unrighteous triumph."

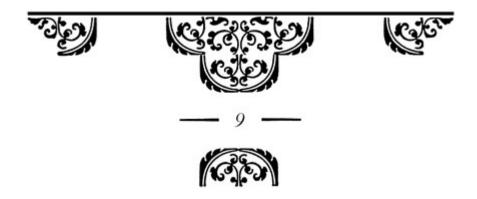
The Voice answered: "Why so angry, my son Jonah?

Do you not know the scripture, that when fire and brimstone rained upon Sodom there were angels who rejoiced and clapped their hands, but the voice of the Lord rolled like thunder through eternity, crying: Who dares rejoice when evil befalls my creatures?"

Jonah put his hands to his head, lamenting: "I can no more—my head aches as though crushed in a vice. If life has no meaning—or if, try as I may, I cannot see that meaning—what is there left? I have been given reason, and when I wish to use it I am forbidden. Then rather destroy me—strike me unconscious—blot me out! I must be a faulty casting—a throwout, fit only for the scrap-heap—for it is impossible that I should see right and you be wrong."

"My poor son," said the Voice, and now there was a downright mournful ring in it. "It will take you much journeying upon the hard earth before you learn to submit yourself to the martyrdom of meaninglessness. But it was you who said that a man has only one life and he must live it as his own. Try then to live it—without me!"

With that the Voice died away, and it was as though a cloud passed before the sun and the world turned grey.



And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceedingly glad of the gourd.

t last the full moon arrived and Jonah, attended by his slaves, came to Nahum's house to bring home his bride. Nahum had sent for a scribe, who brought with him clay tablets on which to write the marriage contract; and when he had promised her a dowry of one hundred gold pieces his paternal heart ran away with him and he said "No, write two hundred!" The scribe moistened the tablet with his wet sponge, erased the first number with the blunt end of his style and wrote in the new one. It was so easy. And Nahum, who could not write, looked at him in admiration—and was also a little proud of his own generosity.

They celebrated the wedding as if it was that of a fairy prince and a fairy princess. There were musicians, storytellers

and dancing girls who twirled and twisted so that their arms were like white

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snakes, and their almond eyes shot tender glances at the bridegroom, so that Sarah was jealous and sulky and had to be soothed. But that was the very best sign of true love. They feasted on fat beef and lamb and veal and fish and cakes and fruits preserved in honey. They drank wine and they made speeches. Outside the poor of the quarter sat waiting for the remnant, and so much was left over that it was enough to satisfy the whole crowd. At the conclusion of the feast Jonah distributed silver pieces with his own hand.

Blue lights were burnt in the garden and the slaves carried Jonah and Sarah home under a shower of millet-seed and old sandals, which rattled against

the top of the litter when thrown by the gay company from the flat roof of the house.

They reached home, and Sarah saw the fine house for the first time. The slaves were drawn up in rows to bid her welcome, and they were glad to see her so young and inexperienced that there was a hope they might be able to do as they pleased with her. And better still, she was so much in love with her husband and had no eyes for anything but him, making him almost impatient at having to point out to her all the glories of their home.

It was moonlight, and they went out into the garden. She leaned upon him, gazing at him with great black eyes—round and moist like his own—with a bluish tint like porcelain in the whites. They held each other's hands with fingers intertwined, and they walked slowly, for it is not easy—unless one is a Siamese twin—to walk like this gazing into another's eyes.

"My beloved," he said, "I have a confession to make to you."

A hot rush of emotion passed through her. Surely he

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was not going to say he loved another or possibly had one or two wives in Tyre! But it was nothing of the sort. He said seriously: "You know that the Lord has spoken to me by a Voice which comes from within me. It will not happen again. He has told me that from now on I am not to be his prophet any longer. Do you mind?"

Oh, how happy and relieved she was. For his being a prophet mattered not at all, if only he were hers. It was grand. It was positively splendid. Now they had their life entirely to themselves.

"Before I saw you, I was a disheartened little man," he said. "I was always afraid—I was afraid of *losing* my life and afraid of *keeping* it, for I feared poverty—and then what would be the use of living? And I was afraid of uniting my life to another's, thinking: Your own responsibility is burden enough for you to bear. But now I am as though born again. I am awakened. My fear has vanished, I have become a man, I have been given courage to live and I have found an object in life—to shelter and protect you, my beloved!"

Sarah thought: How marvellously clever this man is. What answer shall I make him? I will give him a kiss—and she did so. He asked no better answer.

"How can one help loving you?" he said. "You are like the first day of the rainy season, when heaven and earth unbosom themselves to one another. Can one help loving a flower, a nestling or a star?"

For two weeks Jonah was so happy that he thought Paradise had returned to earth. He did not know how the days passed. He had become a child again and the hours went by like a butterfly dalliance with this pretty young woman who loved him. If for a moment he was dissatisfied with himself, he had only to take her head in his hands

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and read in her eyes how she admired him.

It was not till well on in the second week that they began to discover the world around them. Then they grew more sensible and walked arm in arm in the garden, talking of what animals they would get, what trees they would plant, how they would build a summer-house by the little brook that ran through the grounds. They also began to make plans for the future; they must make friends, live in style, give gay parties—in short, enjoy life. But in the midst of their happiness Pilo came to tell them how Nineveh was getting more and more absorbed by this wonderful conversion. The prophets had now begun to work miracles.

"Look at me," he said, drawing himself up. "I'm slim now. That's this fasting. Everybody's fasting. Women have to be as slender as lily-stalks."

Jonah was scandalized to his very soul. His domestic happiness should have been enough for him, but he had to go out and see what foolishness the city was up to. There was now a prophet at every street-comer, and they all stormed against the priests, but not so violently as before; they spoke gently, praising the people, deploring their lot; they shed tears when mentioning the good King, who was not permitted to make Nineveh as happy as he wished, because the priests sought to impose upon him what they hypocritically called the will of the gods. Weeping was the fashion. People whose tears did not flow freely carried little scent-bottles filled with the juice of onions, at which they sniffed.

Jonah could not resist the temptation to heckle, but the crowd received his interruptions in very hostile fashion. He had now lost the protection of the Bodyguard, and cautiously withdrew from the throng, saying to himself

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that the world had become a lunatics' conventicle.

He returned home in a bad humour, which was not improved when Joseph approached him with a mournful countenance, making him think some disaster had occurred. But Joseph only stood wringing his hands, till Jonah seized him by the shoulder and shook him, saying:

"Speak, man! Don't stand there staring at me as if I were a ghost!"

Then Joseph threw himself on his knees, clutched his mantle and kissed its hem in great humility, as he groaned: "Master, I am a sinner unworthy to live under your roof or to eat your bread. I am filled with shame daily, when I see your kindly smile. I have trespassed grievously."

What could be the meaning of this Old Testament language, which Joseph had never been known to use?"

"What have you done?" asked Jonah.

Joseph sobbed it out: "It was I who stole the white peacock which you thought had flown away. I sold it to a dealer in birds, because I wanted so much to have a pair of red sandals like yours."

For a moment Jonah was inclined to smile, but then it struck him that Joseph was infected by this new craving for confession, and that made him so wild that he gave the man a push, sending him over backwards:

"You miserable hypocrite!" he said. "You rob me every blessed day, and now you come and try to white-wash yourself by confessing a trifle that is only a thousandth part of your rascalities. But I won't hear of hypocrisy in my house!"

He went past him into the house of the women, where Sarah sat surrounded by slave girls who were engaged in waving her hair in the oldfashioned way, twisting each separate lock round a curler and moistening the hair with

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honey-water. It was a warm day, and to keep the flies off she fanned herself with the white horse's tail in an ivory handle which was one of Jonah's presents to her. The sight of her beloved face did him good and his anger began to evaporate.

Then she said in all innocence: "My dear husband, can't you help me? I've bought some of these new artificial tears, but I can't get them to stick on."

So Sarah too was a victim of the holy epidemic.

He replied with enforced composure: "Give me the tears."

When she placed the glistening gum drops in his hand he flung them on the floor and crushed them under his foot like something loathsome. "I won't have this mendacious trash in my house," he said. "So now you know it!"

His young wife had never seen him so upset. She could not understand what had provoked him so furiously.

"Every woman in Nineveh wears this kind of tears," she said; "so why mayn't I?"

She wept, and when he saw the tears hanging like glistening dewdrops on her long eyelashes he regretted his outburst and said, patting her cheek: "There, now you have real tears. So what do you want with artificial ones?"

She smiled and said: "You don't understand. It's just the artificial ones that are fashionable. Real tears have been known since the world began."

But that sent him off again: "Can you say I've refused you anything that was handsome and sensible? You have rings set with pearls and rubies, you have ornaments of coral, of agate and emerald—" He counted up all he had given her, and as he was not yet a perfect gentleman he

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mentioned what each article had cost.

But the things she wanted were not dear at all. She only wished to be like everybody else.

"Even if everybody else is mad, hysterical and preposterous?" he asked.

Sarah answered in her simplicity: "Yes, if everybody else is like that, I should like to be the same."

It was enough to drive a man to despair.

When the waving was finished he proposed that they should go out into the garden and play shuttlecock under an awning he had had put up. He put his arm around her, saying she must not be angry with him for making a scene, but it had annoyed him excessively to see how Nineveh had misunderstood the message he had delivered. For the people were not the least bit better. They had got up a masquerade, dressing up as devotees. Underneath their sham tears, sham confessions and their sham sackclothand-ashes material at three silver pieces the yard they were still the same.

At this Sarah interrupted with a question:

"What's that—sackcloth-and-ashes?"

He explained that the weavers of the bazaar had seen there was business to be got out of this revival and had produced this material, of black damask with little white spots, to look like ashes.

"My dear," said Sarah, "you simply must give me a dress of that."

She clung to him like a child, looking into his eyes and hoping to soften him, but he pushed her away roughly and went off to the farthest part of the garden, where he walked up and down for a whole hour, cursing Nineveh and his own fate and wishing the earth would open and swallow up himself, Sarah, Nineveh, the King and all the

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temples. And like Job he said it would have been better if he had never been born. Nineveh was a nest of vipers, and the new pestilence had spread even to his own house.

II

THAT REMARKABLE man, Sargon, occasionally behaved in a way that filled his courtiers with dismay. It was not so bad when he took it into his head to go on all fours and eat grass, as that took place in his hall, where only a few people could see him; but it was far worse when he suddenly had the idea of walking on the bare ground in the sight of all—an unheard-of thing!

Every day at sunset it was his habit to be carried for a tour of his vast garden. He lay upon silk cushions concealed behind a silk curtain, which he raised now and again with a thin white finger so as to look at the landscape. As a rule he quickly let the curtain drop again, for the sight of nature bored him. There was so little ingenuity in it, he thought.

In the palace garden the trees were trimmed square and the palms artificially bent, so that they resembled huge marks of interrogation. Terraces and flights of steps were introduced wherever possible, in imitation of the famous hanging gardens. It was true that all this had been conjured up at the King's command, this ingenious garden had been made to grow by the toil of men; but now that it was there it no longer interested him. On the other hand it soothed his nerves to be rocked in the litter. There was something beneficent in watching the springiness of the carrying-poles.

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But on this particular evening it happened that he suddenly made a sign that he wanted to get out. The litter was to be halted. The captain of the Bodyguard ran up and cringed and wriggled like a worm, as he had to regret that the thing was impossible. "How so?" said the King with a frown. "Is it to be supposed that anything the King desires is impossible?"

Well, the trouble was that they had forgotten to bring carpets, and the King could not possibly tread the bare earth. But the men could be ordered to spread their cloaks, if the King would be pleased to set his foot on them.

The King was not pleased to do so. He had taken the insane idea of wanting to walk on the naked ground. The thought was so repulsive and contrary to nature that the captain of the Bodyguard could scarcely conceal his horror, though courtly etiquette required that whatever the King said was to be received with a smile of comprehension. Then the King solved the problem by simply jumping out of the litter and walking about—in a strangely uncertain and tentative way, like a man with two wooden legs. It was something new for him to tread upon gravel; he wondered how he managed it so easily. For a change he would try walking on grass, on flowers, on stone—he would have trodden on camel-dung if there had been any, to add this to his other sensations. And it was as though he acquired new strength through treading on Mother Earth, from whom we have all come, and in whom even the King would repose one day. He wished to ascend the wall surrounding the palace garden, and when the slaves darted forward to support him as he went up the steps, he thrust them back. He was going to walk by himself. He wished to enjoy that proud sensation. And to-day he thrust with

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unusual roughness, so that one of them fell; but this too gave him pleasure, as a proof that he was not an utter weakling.

He reached the top and stood against the parapet, looking out over the country which was his. He saw the river and the palm groves and fields with a multitude of camels, and he saw oxen in the pastures and men following them barefoot and beating them with sticks. Far away he saw Nineveh, its mountains of brick and its temples. The evening sun flushed the houses and the stepped towers, but the contour of the city was pale, its outlines were obscured by the heat haze and the clouds of dust.

The King hated this city, for he had conceived the mad idea of wishing to be human, and it would not allow this. The city and all it represented in the way of priesthood and other high mightiness wished to employ him as a screen, a scarecrow, a puppet....

He turned to the Guard and called out: "Fetch Samsin!" And they dashed off as if in pursuit of a murderer. Meanwhile the King stood gazing in the direction of the city and muttering to himself. He was seething with anger and ancient grudges which were now at high pressure, for the wind to-day was in the south-west and that brought the dry, nerve-racking air that always made him mad.

Samsin arrived quite out of breath, the fat man suffered so much from having to run. He put his hand to his forehead and said, as required by custom: "Lord, command me, your servant obeys!" But to himself he was thinking: Now he's certainly got one of his bad attacks. He knew that roving look in the King's eyes, like a mad bull.

"Samsin," said the King; "what would happen if I took it into my head to give orders for this city to be levelled with the ground?" He pointed to Nineveh.

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The fat man wheezed that of course it would be done. "It is a great idea, a gigantic idea, nay, an idea worthy of an offended god," he said. "And the city deserves nothing better." But there was dread in his rat-like voice. This was coming it too strong, all the same. The day the King gave this order something terrible would happen.

"Never mind," said the King. "I have made my decision. It is my will that these temples shall be razed to the ground, the priests shall be flogged out of the city, the temple harlots shall be drowned."

"When is all this to take place, lord?" asked Samsin.

"To-morrow," said the King with the matter-of-course air that madmen assume. "A hundred thousand workmen armed with mattocks are to assemble. They will go from temple to temple and will not rest till all are heaps of ruins. When the priests come out of their hiding-places the workmen are to knock them on the head with their tools, as if they were rats. Every living thing is to be killed!"

Samsin gave a terrified look at the King, thinking: The wrath of the gods is upon us. The King has gone perfectly insane!

"Have you understood my orders?" asked the King.

"I hear and obey," said Samsin. "But is the King aware that to-morrow happens to be one of the inauspicious days on which it is dangerous to undertake so great a work?" He said this in the hope of gaining time.

Perhaps the wind would change by to-morrow, and then there was a possibility that the King would again be comparatively normal.

"Am I to be kept waiting for my righteous vengeance?" said the King. "Then what joy is there in being King? Am I no mightier than the fumblers who have to ask the soothsayers whether the day is auspicious or inauspicious?

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I will be rid of these devils of priests. Look here, I've just thought, it won't be enough to knock them on the head like rats. I desire that they be cast alive into burning fiery furnaces. That's better. And we start to-morrow. This deed will cause the day to be auspicious in future."

"Yes, that's right," said Samsin; "but have you considered that this work, which will be remembered as long as the world lasts, ought to be well weighed in all its details?"

"I have thought of nothing else for months," replied the King. "My decision has ripened slowly like a rare fruit, and now the hour of gathering has arrived."

From within the city a great din arose, as the priests summoned the faithful to evening prayer by hammering on the great sacrificial cauldrons. As far out as the palace the air quivered with the harmonious roar. Every man flung himself on the ground. The King alone stood defiantly erect, though Samsin whispered earnestly that he ought not to betray himself. It was best that his vengeance should come as a surprise, a bolt from the blue. Then the King smiled, as madmen do when they hug themselves with the idea that they're tricking the so-called sane. He dropped down and pretended to pray.

That same evening white-clad priests with shaven crowns went from temple to temple inquiring of the yellow-robed chief priests: "What do the scriptures tell us to do if it should come to pass that a King is smitten with manifest insanity, showing itself in a belief that he possesses the power of a god to destroy the world?" To which the chief priests replied with one voice: "The scriptures say that the King's will takes precedence of all others. If the King desires to be as the gods, he must be helped to ascend into heaven. And how this may best be done, and

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the right moment for doing it, will be told us by the astrologers."

So the wise men ascended into the towers. They had above them the great living planetarium, the vault of heaven, and they were in a country whose dry air allowed the stars to sparkle with such power that many of them could see the moons of Jupiter with the naked eye, and yet more could see that Venus had phases like the moon. The wise men stood there in the night in their fluttering mantles, looking at the stars through long tubes and telling their assistants to trace lines on the sanded floor, fixing the position of the heavenly bodies. After that they returned to their cells and undertook remarkable calculations. Nobody knows if they were swindlers or took themselves seriously; but it would be a shame if they did not, for they could hear hymns of lamentation from other priests who proceeded through the temple halls swinging censers and praying the gods graciously to make known their will.

"O Ishtar! O Nebo! O Marduk! O Sin!" they chanted. "Be merciful and speak to us through the stars. Give us omens in the liver of the victim!"

A sheep was already on the altar, firmly held by a couple of priests, as the smell of blood from the preceding sacrifices made the animal restless. The officiating priest had his bronze knife ready. The blow fell; quickly the animal was opened and the liver taken out. It was black. That meant death. But for whom?

The priests resumed their elegy, passing in single file around the altar with mincing steps, like convicts exercising in the prison yard. They prayed that they might be spared the awful necessity of laying hands on the divine person of King Sargon. For it could be read on the temple

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wall before them that Ishtar was well pleased with him and had pronounced curses upon his enemies. "If he is to die, let it be a natural death," they prayed.

The astrologers descended from the tower, and their countenances were transfigured. It seemed that something of the starlight still sparkled in their wise old eyes. The chief priest was in such a state of excitement that he rushed towards them with outstretched arms, his linen mantle flying out behind him, saying: "O ye blessed brethren, what say the heavenly counsellors?"

"It appears," said the wise men, "that the King has not long to live."

As they said this the priests uttered the cry of lamentation prescribed for such an occasion, but it was as false as a ballet-dancer's smile.

The chief priest asked: "How will the King die?"

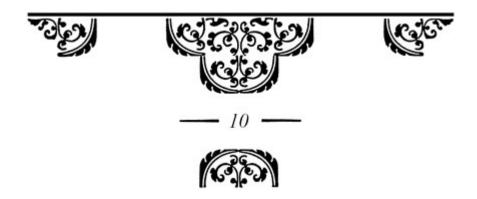
"Unexpectedly," was the diplomatic answer. These old astrologers were not to be caught.

The most venerable of the priests retired to a lonely cell, where they held a long and lively discussion of the inevitable. Nobody is so prompt to pronounce a death sentence as old people whom one would imagine to be themselves haunted by the fear of death; but when one is over eighty all morbid sympathy is congealed. They take a cold and disdainful view of life and death. The stars should be given some assistance, they thought; not from vindictiveness or a desire to punish the apostate, but simply because it was a necessity. A toothless old gentleman enquired what it would cost to have the King put out of the way, and he spoke as dispassionately as if asking the price of plums. The others made a show of being shocked by this frankness, but now that the question was put, there was no harm in giving a purely theoretical

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answer. It would be expensive, but not more than the temples could afford. And then there was the question of where to find the right man; but that was of minor importance in a despotic country, where there are always men to be bought.

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But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.

ext morning, as Sarah was about to rise from her couch, she felt faint and \_\_ could not get up. They tried giving her warm wine with cinnamon, but she only grew weaker. Jonah asked if she was in pain, and she said no, but that she felt as if life were withering within her.

Joseph was sent into the city for a physician and came back with an old man who brought in a leather bag the assortment of remedies that African medicine-men usually carried with them. He examined Sarah carefully, felt her pulse on the left wrist, as prescribed in the case of women, recommended the application of a cold compress to her forehead and rubbing her feet with hot oil in which three scorpions had been boiled. Then he withdrew.

Jonah followed him out and asked when he would call again. The physician said they must not expect to see him any more. The law provided that a physician

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who undertook the cure of a sick person was responsible for his patient's life, and the doctor would not venture to undertake this responsibility. Jonah had better send for a priest.

This was not to Jonah's liking. As a retired prophet he could not very well have any truck with a system of idolatry. He would wait a couple of hours and see. But as Sarah grew steadily weaker, Joseph had to go off again and returned with a fat man who was said to be a marvel at

exorcising the spirits of disease. Jonah bargained with him about the fee, and when they had agreed, the fat man went to look at Sarah. She was asleep, and he made a sign that they were not to wake her.

He stood a long time by her couch, deep in thought, and said: "A pity! A pity! This woman is very beautiful—but what does that avail!"

Then to work. He demanded a copper basin, and it was produced. He demanded live coals, and a slave woman brought them on an iron shovel. He threw the coals into the copper bowl, sprinkled some grains upon them, and a spiral column of smoke rose from the basin. An acrid odour pervaded the chamber as the priest carried the basin round Sarah's couch, singing in a cracked voice a hymn in a language that had not been spoken for over a thousand years. He swung the basin over Sarah's head, vehemently invoking his gods; while Jonah looked on from a corner of the room, hoping that if this did no good, at least it might do no harm.

When all this was done and Sarah still slept, they went cautiously out of the bedchamber, and Jonah asked the priest if he thought Sarah would recover. The fat man answered that this was in the hands of the gods. Perhaps the sacrifice of a lamb might help.

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Jonah at once gave orders for a lamb to be bought, snow-white, and taken to the temple.

The priest received a couple of silver pieces and departed, raising two fingers to bless Jonah. And he said: "We have now done what is in human power. But if the Angel of Death has been given orders to fetch her, nothing can recall that command."

Jonah went back and sat by Sarah's couch, waiting for her to open her eyes. When an hour had gone by she awoke. He asked how she felt, and she replied that she was well, only tired. As he sat with her hand in his he could see that a great change had come over her. Her face seemed to have shrunk, there was nothing left of it but two great eyes.

"Is there nothing you would like?" he asked.

She shook her head, looked at him gratefully and said she had all she wanted.

"Think it over," he said. "You know I am rich."

She looked at him in admiration and thought it was marvellous to be loved by such a man. "May I have a Chinese nightingale? One of those in the little wicker cages. They sing so nicely!"

"Really, my dear," he said. "Surely you could wish for something much dearer than that?" But she shook her head. Just a Chinese nightingale, then she would be happy.

Jonah went himself to the temple of Ishtar, where the dealers in birds had their stands. There was an uproar of screeching in every kind of tone, from great crimson birds with a piercing scream, birds that looked like pigeons and could spread their tails like lyres, queer black birds of prey with huge bumps on their beaks and green birds with beaks like gigantic bananas. There was

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chirping and twittering from cages in which tiny sulphur-yellow and purple birds sat crowded together like shuttle-cocks packed in a box too small to hold them. From every side the sellers shouted to him: "Heh, master, here's a bird from Ophir with gold on its wings"—"Master, master!" cried a black man. "Buy an ape that's the very picture of a man!"

He walked through the throng searching for an ordinary Chinese nightingale, no rare bird. At last he found an old woman seated on the ground surrounded by little wicker cages, no bigger than cigar-boxes, and in each cage there was a little grey bird. He took his seat on a carpet by the side of the woman and they opened negotiations in Oriental fashion.

"My good woman," said Jonah, "will you do me the pleasure of presenting me with one of your birds? My wife is ill and desires a Chinese nightingale."

"By the bird-headed goddess," said the woman, "she shall have one, if it's the last I've got. Point out the finest and it's yours."

Jonah looked at the birds and said: "I suppose they all sing equally well. Show me a bird that's a really good singer."

"Here," said the woman, picking up a cage in which a scared little bird fluttered. "This one's a songster of paradise."

"I take it as a gift from you," said Jonah. "And in return I beg you to accept this piece of silver in memory of my visit."

At this the old woman smiled and said: "The gentleman knows better than I what the bird is worth, but I should be better pleased if I had two pieces of silver."

Jonah proposed that they should cut a silver piece in

half, but the woman was not to be moved, and finally he threw the two silver pieces into her lap, abandoning any pretence of Oriental politeness: "Then take them, you crafty old scorpion!" He took the bird and went.

When Jonah came home with the bird he could see that Sarah had grown weaker while he had been away. She tried to hold the cage, but had no strength to do so, and was obliged to ask him to hang it above her couch so that she could look at the bird as she lay. It hopped ceaselessly to and fro between two perches, like a mechanical toy—but not a note came from it.

"I'm afraid the woman has cheated me," said Jonah. "And she called it a songster from paradise."

"It doesn't matter," said Sarah. "If I die I'll make my soul quite small and creep into the bird, so that I can sing for you."

"Fanciful baby!" he said, patting her hand. "When you are dead your soul will ascend among the stars, and you will see so many beautiful things that you won't care to become a Chinese nightingale and sit in a cage and sing to a lonely man."

"Then you don't know what great love is," she said.

"Good little soul," he answered; "we hope you have many years to live and that we shall be very happy together."

But neither of them believed it. Sarah felt that her soul was about to emerge from its earthly sheath, as a butterfly works its way out of the chrysalis, and Jonah could see how white and transparent her face had become in the last few hours.

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II

CAN THERE be anything in astrology? Anyhow Jupiter was now approaching Saturn. Everybody knows that this means danger to kings and those in high places. Thus the great heavenly lights constantly pass one another, like the mast-head lights of ships that meet at night. Jupiter now had the solemn planet Saturn on the port side, and in the course of a few hours they would pass one another, so what had to be done must be done quickly.

It might also be considered a remarkable sign that, as history tells us, King Sargon felt weak that morning and demanded a stimulating drink. Possibly he was affected in the same way as the berserkers, who collapsed after one of their fits. To-day he was friendly and pliable. The evil spirit had

left him and he was once more the over-refined product of civilization, who accepted his fate with a pale smile.

A messenger was sent for the physician Tabul, who was seventy years of age. He was the only one the King trusted, having once saved the physician's life. Tabul had attempted an incision in the case of a magnate who was suffering from a tumor, and the operation had been performed with a flint knife as prescribed; but the magnate died, and according to law the physician should have had both hands struck off. But the King took him under his protection, and he got off with a fine, on promising that in future he would let his patients die a natural death and abstain from all scientific curiosity.

When the physician arrived, the King condescended to joke with him, saying he hoped the drink wouldn't be so strong as to blow his inside out. The old man handed him the golden cup, which was wrapped round

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with a piece of silk, and his hand shook, but the King took this to be the result of deference and old age combined, and he suspected nothing. He took the cup and drained it.

Then the physician concealed his face with a corner of his mantle, as he withdrew from the hall backwards, as etiquette demanded. The King caught sight of his eyes over the edge of his cloak and they seemed wide with tenor. This surprised him. But the drink had a pleasant effect. It not only scorched his diaphragm like a stiffish cocktail; it set up an agreeable tingling in every pore.

As the physician disappeared behind the curtain there was a brief scuffle in the antechamber. A stifled shriek was heard, followed by a sound as of a sack being flung down. It was the physician receiving his fee, in a form he did not expect. The King listened and was about to call the officer on duty to hear what had happened, but a pleasant drowsiness had come over him, making him lose interest in what was going on outside. He settled himself on the blue silk cushion and closed his eyes. The nation's petted lap-dog dozed for a moment. He had the sensation of flying that one experiences in dreams; there is an indescribable charm in it.

Presently he dreamed that a giant wasp came flying and settled on his stomach and gave him a sting, as if a red-hot rod of iron had been thrust through him. He awoke in a ferment, and now the pains gave him no respite. A king does not shriek as long as he is conscious, so he contented

himself with compressing his lips and turning green. The wasp was there again—sting upon sting, charged with the pains of hell. The King fell over his cushion, sprawling helplessly in convulsions. In

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momentary pauses his brain had flashes of clarity, and he knew he was poisoned and about to die—not like a demigod, ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire on the beams of a rainbow, but like a wretched beggar squirming in his own vomit, a food for worms, his mouth choked with dust.

He tried to get up, as he had heard that it befits a king to die on his feet, but his legs refused to carry him. He called for help. He listened for any sound of footsteps—the house was deserted. And yet he thought he could hear the restrained breathing of the score of men who were skulking behind the curtain and peeping through cracks, but kept as still as mice. The great King, whose inscriptions called him Lord of the World, clutched his silken cushion as a shipwrecked man clings to a piece of wreckage. Around him was the immense floor of polished black marble, which might well represent the surface of the river over which the dead must pass on their way to the underworld.

In the antechamber there was a rattling of arms and the tramp of heavy boots. His son Sennacherib came and pushed aside the men at the curtain, in order to see how far gone was the father who had long been a burden to him. He found him still writhing like a poisoned rat, but Sennacherib showed neither sorrow nor sympathy. He was hardened. He had just come from a little town where he had personally witnessed the flaying alive of three rebel chieftains. That strengthens the nerves, or stiffens them at any rate.

He beckoned a slave to approach, and asked: "How long will it take?"

The slave called to another slave who was in charge of the water-clock, and said that according to the statement

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of the physician it only wanted another half stroke.

"Where is the physician?" asked Sennacherib.

He was told with regret that the physician had died of excessive emotion.

"But Samsin?"

He was dead too.

"And the Greek woman?"

She had taken poison before they could catch her. Otherwise it had been intended to burn her alive.

The King on his silk cushion was now so far gone that he howled like a dog in his delirium—altogether improper for a great monarch. Sennacherib considered whether it might not be necessary to let a trusty man put an end to the scandal. Then the great King was silent. He lay on his back with both arms stretched out, as though crucified on an invisible cross of suffering. The chief of the Bodyguard went first into the hall and respectfully performed all the ritual required on entering the King's presence. He held his cloak over his mouth, lest his breath should infect the great ruler, as he bent over the King and ascertained that he was dead. Again the stars had turned out right. The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn was fatal.

A moment later the palace was buzzing like a beehive in the swarming season. The chief of the Bodyguard had gone into their hall and proclaimed: "The great King Sargon has ascended to the gods! Sennacherib is now our King!" There was no real sign of either joy or sorrow, all was swallowed up in noise. There was a tramp of feet, a rattling of arms, a shouting of commands; horsemen whipped up their mounts and galloped in the direction of Nineveh, guards fell in, striking their shields, creaking with leather accoutrements, banging the butts

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of their spears against the marble pavement. No matter who was King, the system would go on, and the system laid down that a man was to fight, march and slay until he himself was trampled down and slain. Business as usual was the motto. In the future, as in the past, small nations would be driven into exile as if they were flocks of sheep, cornfields would be trampled, palms cut down, men and women burnt—and the prophets would raise dirty hands to heaven calling down curses on the oppressors, without any visible result. But from now on all this would be in the hands of Sennacherib, and, to use a modern expression, he would give the war engine all the gas it could take, until he too would one day meet his death on a silken cushion in the great hall.

The chief priest of the Moon-god arrived in a litter to offer his congratulations and his regret that this sudden illness had snatched away a beloved King.

He added: "Now that the great King is dead, the people will naturally ask who has called down the wrath of the gods upon the country."

Sennacherib looked at him coldly and replied: "If the people ask silly questions they must either be left unanswered or the people must be flogged till they have more sense."

"Yes," said the priest; "unless, great King, the answer is so apparent that the people can find it for themselves. A little bird has already told me that the Jews are thought to be at the bottom of it."

Sennacherib raised his hand as a sign that the interview was at an end, and said briefly: "Then kill the Jews!"

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III

THE GREAT city of Nineveh was awakening after a restless night. Not many people had had strength of mind enough to overcome their uneasiness and get some sleep. In every house there had been excited whispers: What will happen now? What will the new King do about the salt tax? And about the fines for passing the gates after hours? Those whose vision was wider discussed foreign politics. What was Sennacherib's attitude towards Egypt? He would certainly bring power and wealth to Assyria, but it would cost much blood.

When morning came it was assumed that Nineveh had wept all night over the great King; therefore the day was to be one of rejoicing. No shop was to be opened, the workshops were to lie idle, no camel was to bear a burden, no ox to draw the plough. On this day the nation would thank the gods for giving it a King like the sun, a ruler whose countenance shone like fire, a lion in strength, but a god in wisdom. Anyone who owned a clean garment put it on to-day. People flocked to the temples, which supplied the place of newspaper offices, to hear the latest. The five hundred story-tellers, who usually sat at street corners, had also gone to the temples. To-day nobody wanted to listen to fictitious sensations, as reality was for more exciting.

And no more was seen of sackcloth or ashes or artificial tears or people who stood up and confessed their petty sins. It was known that Sennacherib was a supporter of the ancient gods, so everyone who had been attacked by the modernized faith made haste to throw off the infection and pray for forgiveness.

the slaves banged on the great sacrificial cauldrons till it sounded as if millions of gigantic wasps filled the air with their hum. The notes were not permitted to die away in orderly succession; one sphere of sound collided with another, producing strange discords, which surged in a conflict of resonance and were overtaken by other waves from more distant temples, so that they clashed like vehicles in a traffic jam—a regular battle of noise.

The traders who had booths in the temples, smiled blissfully. The good times had returned. The sellers of doves shouted: "Make the goddess Ishtar happy with a pair of snow-white corn-fed doves at half a silver piece. Cage thrown in!" "Hallo! Hallo!" yelled another. "Here's the god Nebo, the mascot, as a clasp for your cloak. Genuine Phœnician work!"

The crowd flowed between these rows of enterprising traders, laughing and chatting. After all, it was delightful to come back to the old gods—so comforting! An old woman was saying: "Ah, talk about curing rheumatism, there's nobody to compare with Puzulu. He's not one of your great gods, but he does the trick!"

The temple harlots had put on their best dresses and sat on their high seats like superannuated singers on a cabaret platform; but they expected no custom so early in the day, they only sat there to do honour to the temple. An old priest came past and was greeted with great respect: "Here we are again, Father Pilu," said a cheery youth. And the old priest raised his hand in blessing and said: "I knew it. You will always come back. One has only to be patient."

The temple court was filled with the faithful who were waiting for the god to be brought out, but this was not done. Skinny young priests in fluttering robes stood on

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the steps of the pyramid-towers making speeches. Their faces were quite distorted with zeal for the true faith. They shrieked themselves as hoarse as crows and had to be relieved by others. But the text was always the same. "The great King is dead!" they said. "The new King brings this message from the gods. Save the country! 'Kill the Jews!' They flung the words out, as though cracking whips of eloquence over the heads of the faithful. Kill the Jews! These people are not of our blood. They are mixed with people

from the North, who dwelt in the country before they conquered it. Therefore they are strangers to genuine Assyrian ways of thought. They do not think or feel as we do. Kill them!"

For a moment the crowd was taken aback. It was in holiday humour today and had looked for something more cheerful, but, after all, the message was not so bad: Kill the Jews! Well, why not?

Nature had designed the foreigners for their fate. They said they were God's chosen people, but chosen for what? For suffering and persecution. One city expelled them for not being black enough, another persecuted them for not being white enough. Were they a nation at all? The Phœnicians were a nation, the Chaldeans were a nation, the Persians were a nation, but these Jews had arisen at a point of intersection of many races. For ten years they served Yahveh, then for the next ten years they relapsed and sewed Baal and Ashtaroth. They had a country which they called their own, but every Jew longed to leave that country and go out into the world, since Jews cannot live on Jews. And then, when a mighty king drove them into exile, they insisted on going back again.

"O my brethren!" shouted a young priest; "you who

are of the same blood with us, who have the same aims and the same gods! Listen to what these gods say to you on this great day. They say: When the harvest fails and the desert wind has parched the earth: kill the Jews! When the War-god turns against you and gives victory to the enemy: kill the Jews! When the demons of pestilence steal over the country and send men down to the realm of death with blackened faces: kill the Jews!"

The sun beat down on the open court, making the sweat pour off the blotched faces that were turned towards the priests. They were now well worked up, which was no difficult matter, as the thirst for blood was always latent in them, though in the ordinary way they could behave like well-trained sheepdogs. And now the priests cried out: "This is King Sennacherib's gift to his beloved people: 'I give into your hands the lives of the Jews, their houses, their cattle, their goods and their slaves. Go and secure your booty. Kill the Jews!""

The priests struck their left palms with their clenched right fists, like speakers ramming home a fact. "Kill the Jews and purify your souls! Two birds with one stone!"

The excitement of the mob found vent in a shout of joy. They felt as they did on the great festival, when the priests proclaimed that Ishtar had returned from her journey through the Underworld. They shook hands with perfect strangers and promised mutual fraternity. They had been given an object. The gods might have laid heavy penalties upon the people, but they had chosen the more lenient course of making the Jews pay. Thus the occasion was transformed into one of popular entertainment, when one was given a chance of enjoying oneself and serving a good cause, all free of charge. Not only that; there was a hope of making a bit.

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A moment later the temple court was empty. The yellow dust settled again over the tracks of thousands of toes, which had left marks like birds' claws in sets of ten, each accompanied by two depressions. All these feet now carried frenzied people in the direction of the Jewish quarter. Everywhere the stream received affluents from side streets; it was joined by crowds coming from other temples where the same order of the day had been given out. The men smiled and greeted one another with joyful shouts.

The mob surged along the processional streets and only halted when some rascal thought of shouting outside a shop: "This is a Jew's house! Let's raid it!" Instantly the crowd fell upon the man and killed him before he had time to explain that he was a good Assyrian. And none of the neighbours dared to take his part for fear of being thought pro-Jewish.

By this time the crowd consisted not only of believers and patriots, but also of the scum of the ale-houses, the brothels, the common lodging-houses and the thieves' quarter. All this refuse was received with open arms, as the great cause united elements that were otherwise irreconcilable. Even the hungry had forgotten their hatred of the well-fed. To-day all would eat their fill at the Jews' expense. A dip in the lucky bag might make a beggar rich. The men of the lowest order were the most provident; they had brought not only axes and knives, but sacks and baskets.

It was a great day, one which brought out the heroic quality in men. The date-seller, accustomed to being beaten by his wife, was to-day a real angel of death. His piercing cry could be heard constantly, like the cracking voice of a boy. "Kill the Jews!" he shouted, quite superfluously,

as not one of the crowd had come out for any other purpose. But they had to give vent to their excitement, and they uttered shrieks like birds of prey hunting in a flock. A woman who had led her husband a dog's life for years waved to him affectionately from the roof, shouting: "Bring home an anklet. But remember, it's the twisted ones that are fashionable!" He promised to do what he could.

By now the whole Jewish quarter knew what was coming. The wily ones disguised themselves. They hastily shaved off hair and beard, assumed a lisping accent and passed themselves off as Babylonians on a visit. All who could fly mounted on asses and camels and made for the western gate. They did not lock up their houses and took care to leave out food and wine, so as to gain time.

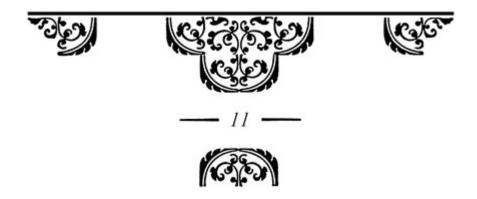
A confusion of vehicles got jammed in the city gate. Rich, fat Jewesses could be seen slipping out of their litters and coming to blows with cameldrivers in their struggle to get on. The fortunate owner of an elephant used it as a steam-roller, smashing its way through the living mass. The guard had withdrawn to the upper storey of the gate, from whence they looked down with disgust at these creatures fighting like crabs caught in a net.

Meanwhile the fanatical rabble had reached the Jewish quarter, and the massacre began of those unfortunates who had not been able to get away. Many men searched the houses for plunder, others, idealists of a sort, preferred to enjoy the delight of murdering. Money can be made any day, if one is lucky, but it is not often one has a chance of killing people without getting into trouble. A pious, unearthly hate gleamed in their eyes, as they struck down some commonplace Jewish individual who

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had done neither good nor harm. The poisonous Jews had vanished long before; it was the weak, the stupid and the poor that were left. The murderers uttered loud yells of rapture, unless they were of the kind that slay with silent, perverse devotion, as though occupied with a mystery in which ordinary beings have no part.

During all this the sun shone with kind impartiality upon good and evil. The dead lay with their faces buried in the dirt, or looking straight up into the blue sky. The flies were already busy with them. The dogs came and sniffed at them. Wounded men crept into corners, hoping to die in peace. They were terribly afraid of the dear children who had borrowed mamma's kitchen knife and were out for their own amusement.



Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow.

And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

hat same morning Jonah sat by Sarah's couch holding her hand. She had slept calmly during the night, and now she lay still, waiting for the feeble flame of life to be extinguished. For she was a happy child of nature, and had none of the moderns' fear of death.

She said in a weak voice: "Do you believe we shall meet again?"

He did not know what to answer. The doctrine was vague on this point, but it was permitted to hope: "We shall meet," he said, "in the clouds of sunset—in the stars—in the flowers."

"And shall we know one another?" she asked.

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"Always!" he said positively, as one assures a child that fairies do exist. "Whenever we meet we shall be drawn to one another. Otherwise it would all be meaningless."

She said with a faint smile: "Now it is you who have a real tear on your cheek."

She tried to rise and wipe it away, but had not the strength. When she had smiled at him once more she drew the coverlet over her face, for she was afraid of looking ugly when she died. She was a woman and vain to the last.

Jonah thought she wished to sleep. He stole out into the colonnade, meeting Joseph, who asked how Sarah was. Jonah replied that she was asleep. Joseph said kindly that it was a good sign.

He brought the great news of King Sargon's death. "They say it means war. His son Sennacherib is a soldier king."

To-day Jonah thought it mattered not at all who was king of Assyria. He turned his back on Joseph and went into his garden to be alone. He would pray God once more to grant him Sarah's life. And he prayed, but he received no answer, though he felt that the prayer had gone through and reached its destination. But peace fell upon him, for he thought that if Sarah died, at least nothing worse could befall him.

When he came back he went quietly up to the couch and cautiously raised the coverlet. It was all over. The gourd had withered. Sarah was dead.

He took it calmly. He bowed his head and muttered the prayer for the dead, without giving much thought to the words. Actually there was no longer any use in praying. He had no desires—no fear and no hope.

He went out into the court and said to the slaves: "My

wife is dead." They broke into loud-voiced lamentations, which annoyed him, as he knew it to be an empty formality. He went back and seated himself by the body.

And as he sat there the Voice spoke to him, saying: "Look you, Jonah, you are surprised that I could not find it in my heart to destroy this great city with its many thousands of living creatures. And now you yourself are weeping over a single human being."

Jonah replied in a hard, cold voice: "Yes, this time you have hit me hard. But was it necessary for this innocent person to die, that you might have an opportunity of flinging your truths in my face?"

He expected something terrible to happen, as a punishment for this open rebellion; but he was forgiven, since he was beside himself with grief. Jonah sat in solitude, and now he wept quietly—the hot tears of relief that a child sheds on the loss of a kitten.

Then Joseph came quietly in with an old garment and laid it down without a word. He had the practical idea that when one rends one's garments, as was the rule at a death, one takes care not to have one's best

clothes on. But Jonah did none of the things that were prescribed. He did not beat his breast, he did not tear his hair, nor did he put ashes on his head.

The professional mourners presented themselves. These women had a tariff for every form of mourning, from the subdued ritual of wailing over the dead, to the passionate, when they scratched their faces till the blood flowed. Jonah paid them at the highest rate and asked them to go.

For several hours he sat absorbed in grief without noticing how quiet his house had become, owing to the slaves having fled as soon as they heard of the persecution.

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They would not risk being caught in the house of a Jew. He heard the distant seething of a crowd, the hum of shouting, but took it to be the customary jubilation of the populace on being given a new slave-driver. What concern was it of his?

Joseph came in, so upset that he entirely forgot to show any marks of respect. He cried distractedly:

"Master, they've started killing the Jews! They say every single Jew in Nineveh is to be murdered!"

"Don't disturb me," said Jonah.

"Yes, but your life's at stake, master!"

"Go," said Jonah, pointing to the door.

Joseph went, believing Jonah had gone mad, since it made no impression on him that his life was in danger.

Jonah turned to the dead and looked at the cold pale face. There is something strange in every dead person, as though this being—which is really no longer a being, but only a thing—and yet—it seems to be conscious of a secret into which the living are not initiated. The closed mouth looks as if it would say: You would hear strange things, if I could speak!

Jonah felt the curious felicity that attends sincere grief: that gentle quivering of the heart, which is a delightful sensation, if one has never before had occasion to reflect that one has a heart.

Then the bird suddenly broke into song. The dumb creature threw its head back and flung a jubilant trill out into the room, as though neither death, pain, sorrow or vanity had any existence.

As he looked it spread its wings and quivered with rapture at its own song. It put its head on one side and then on the other, its little coal-black

eyes twinkled with merry audacity, and it poured out an endless stream of 304

trills and double trills. Was it Sarah's soul that had taken possession of the bird and brought him a message which he understood better than the philosophical speech of the Voice?

II

JOSEPH CAME a second time, quite beside himself with fear. He threw himself on his knees, crying: "Now they're coming!" He approached Jonah shuffling over the floor with outstretched hands, like the legless beggar at the gate, who pursued people holding out his hat. He was pitiable, as Jonah himself had been when he lay on the deck of the ship of Tarshish.

"Save me, master," said Joseph. "The fear of death torments me. See how I'm shaking. I don't want to die in the land of the heathen, where my soul will roam like a lost shadow. I want to go back to Jerusalem. I want to die in my own country. Not here—not here!"

He caught hold of Jonah, who shook him off and went to a great chest of cedar-wood. The other crept after him, still whimpering like a dog. But between his sobs he cried:

"Oh, that bird, that bird! How can a bird sing when they're murdering people twenty yards away?"

Jonah opened the chest. There lay the robe of honour and the silver shield. This dress and this shield would carry a man unscathed among murderers. Nobody would dare to stop him. Jonah flung the robe to Joseph, saying:

"Take it! Save your life! Go back to our native land!"

Joseph thanked him. He tried to kiss Jonah's feet, but Jonah pushed him off, and Joseph took the robe over his arm and ran out as if he had stolen it. He was afraid Jonah might change his mind.

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When he had gone Jonah drew the coverlet over the face of the dead. He took the birdcage down from the wall and said:

"You wished me to give him the robe of honour, did you not?"
Naturally the bird could not answer; it went on singing unconcernedly.

He went out into the colonnade, opened the door of the cage, expecting the bird to fly out; but it clung to its perch, so that he had to put his hand in, take a tender hold of the little ball of feathers and pass it out.

"Now fly away," he said.

It sat on his hand before throwing itself into the void and soaring upwards with a song. For a moment he stood watching it, then he went out of his splendid house, the last to leave it, as befits the captain of a sinking ship. A peacock came straddling up on clumsy feet, thinking it was going to be fed. He smiled and showed it his empty hands.

Then he went out into the street in the direction of the Damascus gate. There was a noise behind him. He heard voices shouting: "A Jew—a Jew!" They had a gay sound, like cockney sportsmen after birds. As they overtook him he turned to them and said calmly: "I am Jonah—the Jewish prophet." He expected them to fall upon him, but they stared at him as though they didn't understand—perhaps they didn't even see him—their eyes were faraway and without expression—they turned aside and ran on.

Farther on another mob approached from a different direction. He placed himself in their path and shouted: "Look at me, you Assyrian dogs! I am the Jew, Jonah. Give me my death. Kill me and see how a man who has

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found out the emptiness of life can leave it with a smile."

They neither saw nor heard him. Thus he passed through the streets, and an invisible Power walked at his side and led him unscathed through the massacre. His hour was not yet come, but this gave him no joy. His life was nothing but a torment. He was over-tired and only wished to sleep the great sleep.

He crossed the bridge to the great field on the other side of the river where the caravans were encamped. The first man who addressed him was the sheik who had led the caravan in which Jonah had arrived at Nineveh as a camel-driver. He said in a friendly tone: "You're the very' man I'm looking for. We start as soon as the worst of the midday heat is over."

"Where to?" asked Jonah.

"To Damascus!"

SO JONAH was once more travelling on the sun-scorched road that led to Damascus—the road back to the sea. The dust lay inch-deep and yellow, bearing the tracks of camels' feet and naked human toes. He was the last of the file. Behind him were the temples of Nineveh, shining in the sun like mountains of chalk, but he did not look back. He caught the bitter-sweet smell of his animal and heard the soporific creaking of its mighty joints, as it meditatively placed one foot in front of the other. The thick dust swallowed up the sound of its steps.

In front of him he had the swaying coffee-coloured hindquarters of another camel, as it strode along with

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dignity. The moving hoofs kicked the dust back at every step.

Thus he was to march for many days, but to that he gave no thought. He could have gone on like this into eternity.

Then it was that the Voice came to him and said, as one who has fallen out with a friend and wishes to make it up:

"Well, Jonah. Here we are, back again!"

Jonah was stand-offish. He did not answer. Everything had been taken from him, and was he to be appeased with a friendly word? No! He pursed his lips defiantly.

"It's no use being obstinate," said the Voice. "You must admit I've thrown you, both shoulders touching. You've wrestled and you must take your defeat like a man."

Jonah was still silent. He refused to unlock himself.

The voice went on: "Wasn't it you who said you carried your hat as high as any other being in existence? How does your hat feel now, Jonah?"

It seemed that the camel sensed the magnetic field surrounding Jonah, for it became restless and refractory. He had to use his stick, and actually he was not sorry to find a vent for his anger, so he hit hard. The camel was offended and shrieked. It looked at him reproachfully, but soon fell back into its steady gait, and Jonah said: "I'll show you who's master!"

"Yes," said the Voice seriously. "That is just the point."

Jonah thought he could detect a note of mockery in the Voice, and it made him boil over. He said: "It's nothing to boast of, kicking a man when he's down.

Tell me rather: What is the meaning of it all? *Is* there any meaning? Anyhow I can't see it."

The Voice said: "When Solomon built the Temple and had the ground levelled, an anthill was destroyed. Then an ant got up on its hind legs and asked: What is the meaning of this? And Solomon left the question unanswered. Not because there was no meaning, but because it was hopeless to try to explain it to an ant."

"So it's I who am the ant," said Jonah, huffed. "But I have sense enough to see that I have been an instrument for a great cause, even if I resisted for a time—the object has been attained. So why must I leave Nineveh as a beggar? Why must I lose the woman who loved me? Why did you grow soft-hearted and spare drunkards, usurers, harlots, idlers and blasphemers in Nineveh, when for me—your servant, though a frail one—you had no pity? What is the meaning of it? Well, of course you may say that I aimed at success; but is a man to be punished for wishing to see the fruits of his labours? Then why not punish those who enjoy abundance from serving the Devil? What is the meaning? It is not I alone who complain. All the world's thinkers and prophets have wondered at the ungodly being allowed to live in luxury on people's stupidity, laziness, fashionable follies and craving for amusement, while they who guide men in the right path are dismissed with a brass farthing. Who can see the meaning of it?"

"My son," said the Voice; "it is yourself who have no meaning, because you are a wheel in a great work that has broken loose and tried to roll out into the world by itself. It is for this reason that in my love I have come down to tell you that in spite of all there is a meaning in existence, and I give you my word that it is a loving

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meaning, and that one day you will find that it is a happy meaning. But so long as you cannot see behind the face of things, you must be content to believe—as your fathers have done—and as your successors will have to do—until the day when the human brain has grown a storey higher, so that men may overcome the chaos they now carry within themselves."

Jonah battled with himself, for there was bitterness in his soul. It would be easier to believe, he thought, if he were one of those on whom the Lord showered benefactions—and yet—who were the people one saw in the temples—the poor, the sorrowful, all those on whom life had trampled—so perhaps it was a necessity after all?

"Good," he said; "I will believe! Yes, I believe—at this moment in any case—perhaps not to-morrow—I daren't make any promises. Yes, one: I believe there *must* come a day when the world will be so ordered that everyone will be able to see there is a meaning in things; but I cannot see how that day is to come if we all sit with our hands in our laps and simply pray and wait for the miracle—"

"Now, now!" said the Voice. "Hands off my saints! Some are to bring it to pass through prayer—others by fighting."

With these words it seemed that the Voice faded away, and Jonah cried hurriedly: "Hi! Hi! Wait a bit. What's to happen when I come to Damascus? How shall I get to Tyre?"

The Voice made no answer. Jonah was back in this world with its tangible dust, its burning sun and screaming camels; but he held up his head and marched forward, for he now understood that, even if he was never

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to be one of the lowly of heart who stand before the Throne and fill the heavens with songs of praise, he was made of the same dust as the great doubters, the untiring questioners, who cling to God's mantle and can never come near enough to him.

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